Responses to hierarchy patterns of rebellion and obedience in the York Corpus Christi play.

Dorothy M. Ricciotti

University of Windsor

1986

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd

Recommended Citation

Ricciotti, Dorothy M., "Responses to hierarchy patterns of rebellion and obedience in the York Corpus Christi play." (1986). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 3343.
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/3343

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000 ext. 3208.
NOTICE

The quality of this microfiche is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Previously copyrighted materials (journal articles, published tests, etc.) are not filmed.

Reproduction in full or in part of this film is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30.

LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE NOUS L'AVONS RECEUE

THIS DISSERTATION HAS BEEN MICROFILMED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED
RESPONSES TO HIERARCHY:

PATTERNS OF REBELLION AND OBEDIENCE

IN THE YORK CORPUS CHRISTI PLAY

by

© Dorothy M. Ricciotti

A Thesis
submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of
English in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts at
the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1986
Permission has been granted to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis and to lend or sell copies of the film.

The author (copyright owner) has reserved other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her written permission.

L'autorisation a été accordée à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de microfilmier cette thèse et de prêter ou de vendre des exemplaires du film.

L'auteur (titulaire du droit d'auteur) se réserve les autres droits de publication; ni la thèse ni de longs extraits de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation écrite.

ISBN 0-315-29316-0
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................. IV

CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 1

I. THE ULTIMATE VICE: SIN AS REJECTION OF THE DIVINE HIERARCHY .............................................. 7

II. "THE WORLD TURNED 'UPSIDOWN'": PATTERNS OF THEME, CHARACTERIZATION, MOOD, AND STYLE ..................................................................... 39

III. THE ULTIMATE VIRTUE: THE SHIFT TO NEW TESTAMENT MORALITY ...................................................................................... 77

CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 88

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................... 92
ABSTRACT

The revival of Corpus Christi drama on stage and in classrooms indicates that extensive preparation is not vital to an appreciation of the drama, either by reader or by viewer. For the York Play, this is largely because an understanding of even the most fundamental aspects of the hierarchical model of the universe provides the theological basis for a productive reading of the cycle — a basis which illuminates the meaning of individual episodes as well as the patterns which link them. The opening episodes evoke these pertinent facts concerning the chain of being; this drama thereby presents the basic "cosmological" context by which each episode must be judged.

In Play I, the angels respond in two different ways to the superiority of their creator, thereby providing two models of behaviour; from these two models extend the patterns of characterization, theme, mood, action, and speech which continue even to the play of the Judgment. The themes of pride vs. humility and disobedience vs. obedience are closely related to the hierarchical assumption. However, some recent critical comments on violence and humour in Corpus Christi drama betray a failure to consider this "cosmological" context. Despite the Incarnation, which seems to upset the
original order, the hierarchical assumption continues to dominate the New Testament episodes of the York Play.

If the coherence of episodes into a dramatic unity depends on these patterns, and if these patterns are natural expressions of a belief in hierarchy, then this corporate belief provides at least a partial explanation for the unity of the York Play, an explanation which avoids the problems involved in positing the intention of a hypothetical reviser as the source of coherence.
INTRODUCTION

The York Corpus Christi Play developed over a period of some one hundred and fifty years,¹ from the end of the fourteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth century in a prosperous city in Northern England. One valid preparation for encountering this text is an attempt to recover the intellectual, social, and artistic milieu in which it grew. Eleanor Prosser declares that we must make ourselves ready for a reading of Corpus Christi drama by learning as much as possible about the religion of medieval England, for without that priming we miss a great deal of its value:

Viewed through twentieth-century eyes, the cycles are indeed naive, crude, dull, but we have not been able to see them as they really were. As a result of modern prejudice, we have ignored the one key which can unlock the medieval mystery: the religion which was, indeed, its lifeblood.²

I disagree that extensive religious knowledge is a prerequisite for a productive encounter with Middle English religious drama. I realize that any kind of knowledge which bears on a text or a performance enriches one’s understanding of the work in question. Moreover, I recognize that in the case of Corpus Christi drama our theological distance from the story is complicated by the fact that intertwined with a medieval view of religion is a particular hierarchical view of the universe: the chain of

¹I take the date for the earliest record of craft-guilds' involvement in some kind of presentation at York from Records of Early English Drama: York, ed. A. F. Johnston and M. Rogerson (2 vols., Toronto, 1979), pp. 4-7, i.e. 1386-7; the later date refers to c. 1567, see F. Meredith, "John Clerk's Hand in the York Register", Leeds Studies in English, xii (1961), pp. 245-71.

being which included a place for each social class, species, planet, and
which had implications not only for theology, but also for philosophy,
cosmology, economics, secular and ecclesiastical politics, and social
class theory. As a society, we have travelled far from the view of
reality which posits God as creator and zenith of a finite universe,
assumes a divinely-ordained social and economic niche for each human
being, and sees humankind as a species which remains basically unchanged
from creation until judgment.

Yet, the revival of Corpus Christi drama on stage and in classrooms
indicates that extensive preparation is not vital to an appreciation of
the drama, either by reader or by viewer. This is, I hope to show,
largely because an understanding of even the most fundamental aspects of
the chain of being provides the theological basis for a productive
reading of the York Play -- a basis which illuminates the meaning of
individual episodes as well as the patterns which link them. These
pertinent facts concerning the divine hierarchy are evoked by the first
play of the York cycle; this drama thereby presents the basic
"cosmological" context by which each episode must be judged. A basically
formalist reading of the York Corpus Christi Play, then, provides the
groundwork on which this study is built.

In the introduction to Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi
Play (1977), Richard Collier describes a turning point in the study of
Corpus Christi drama:

3For full discussions of the idea see: Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great
Brothers, 1936); N. Max Wilders, The Theologian and His Universe:
Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present, trans. by
The restoration of the Corpus Christi plays to the stage has established them as substantial and powerful works of dramatic art. It has also taken them out of the province of the literary historian and inspired modern critics to take a fresh look at them.4

Eight years later, Corpus Christi criticism still appears to be undergoing a shift in emphasis, a fact which is reflected in the title given to the three sessions devoted to this drama at the Twentieth International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo): "The Cycle Plays and the Critic: Reassessments and Recommendations." In one of the sessions, during her "critique of formalism,"5 T. Coletti described a movement away from a literary approach to the plays; according to Coletti:

A general discomfort with the methods and assumptions of this "literary" view (i.e., formalism) of the cycles, I believe, has inspired the last decade's worth of activity in the other avenue of approach, the "dramatic." All of us who study medieval drama must think of ourselves as historians, but it is in the practice of the "dramatic" approach that a commitment to history (as distinguished from "literature") is most clearly articulated.6

I choose to present a study based on a "literary" approach to the York Play at a time when the majority of critics feel more comfortable with either a historical, or an interdisciplinary, or one of several other critical attitudes.7


5Theresa Coletti, "Formalist Criticism and the Cycles," read at Twentieth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May, 1985, p. 3.

6Coletti, p. 10.

7Consider, for instance, the titles of several of the papers read at Kalamazoo in 1985: "The Critical Path and the Pilgrimage of the Cycles" (E. El Itreby); "Music and the Cycle Plays: The Untold Story" (A. Faulkner); "Liturgy and Cycle Form: A Reassessment" (E. Dunn); "Cultural
Yet, as will become apparent as the paper progresses, even a basically formalist approach invites me to confront several issues which those scholars working in the historical and the dramatic avenues find most pressing. For example, as I consider questions of unity and intentionality, the unfixed nature of the text and the question of staging techniques become important. When discussing patterns of characterization, I must pose questions concerning medieval techniques of dramatic characterization. In other words, while I maintain that the average reader or viewer can understand the York Play without direct aid from the dramatic historian, at the same time I do not intend to limit myself to merely presenting a reading of the text. I shall both show that the Play provides the context which allows a reader to understand its meaning, and at the same time I shall relate this basic reading to several current critical questions.

Chapter 1 explores the implications of the most basic outline of the great chain of being — God-angel-man-woman-animal-devil — for several episodes of the York play. By staging the Creation Play I evokes the context by which one must judge every character in the cycle. The angels respond in two different ways to the superiority of their creator, thereby providing two models of behaviour; from these two models extend the patterns of characterization, theme, mood, action, and speech which continue even to the play of the Judgment. I shall show the close relationship of the themes of pride vs. humility and disobedience vs.

Criticism and Late Medieval Urban Drama” (K. Ashley); “Rezeptionsästhetik and Critic” (C. C. Flanagan). Works such as C. Davidson’s From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays (1984) also reflect this trend; it focuses on dramatic technique and sources in art as much as on analyses of individual episodes and their inter-relationships.
obedience to the hierarchical assumption. I shall address the problem of viewing certain episodes without considering this "cosmological" context in terms of recent comments on violence and on humour in the Corpus Christi cycles.

In Chapter II, I shall argue that the oft-noted patterns are rooted in the hierarchical belief. These patterns are of characterization, for example, the boastful tyrant, the upstart servant, types of Lucifer vs. types of the good angels; of theme, for example, pride, disobedience; of mood, for example, the chaos of hell vs. the order of heaven, the chaos of Herod's court; and of speech, for example, swearing, usurpation of self-praise. The question of the characterization of Pilate is discussed as to how its inconsistency relates to the hierarchical assumption. If the coherence of episodes into a dramatic unity depends on these patterns of repetition and juxtaposition, and if these patterns are natural expressions of a belief in hierarchy, then this corporate belief provides at least a partial explanation for the unity of the York Play, an explanation which avoids the problems involved in positing the intention of a hypothetical reviser as the source of unity.

Chapter III shows that the concern with the theme of obedience vs. disobedience continues, although with modification, throughout the New Testament episodes of York. This theme reflects the juxtaposition, which begins in the opening episode, between rejection and acceptance of the authority of the creator. Concern with hierarchy also continues, both implicitly and explicitly. I make this point in order to counter a possible implication of Ashley's reading which claims that in Towneley hierarchically-based morality gives way to a morality based on humility
and faith.

The brevity of this study makes it necessary for me to focus on the perverted response to hierarchy. While one might trace patterns of goodness — obedience, worship, humility, charity, and faith — the first two chapters of this study will centre on the relationship of the rebellious creature to the creator.
CHAPTER I

THE ULTIMATE VICE: SIN AS REJECTION
OF THE DIVINE HIERARCHY

The York Corpus Christi cycle opens with God's declaration of incontestable supremacy:

I am gracys and grete, God withoutyn begynnyng,
I am maker vnmade, all mighte es in me;
I am lyfe and way unto welth-wynnyng,
I am formathe and fyrste, als I byd sall it be.1

Because He is "maker vnmade" — the uncreated creator, i.e., "God" (creator) "withoutyn begynnyng" (uncreated) — His will shall be fulfilled; in His words: "als I byd sall it be." In these first two lines reverberate centuries of both the belief of Christian people and the speculation of Christian thinkers. John the Scot distinguished between four levels of being: that which is not created and does not create is of the lowest kind; that which is created but does not create occupies the second lowest niche; the created creator is next; at the top exists the being who creates and is not himself created: the "maker vnmade."2 In other words, God is the zenith of being; He is the being than which nothing greater can be conceived: He has every perfection.3

The idea was discussed in all its subtleties by philosophers; nonetheless, it has translated into a truism of the Christian religion.

---


We find this reasoning from God's primary role to the respect due to 
Him in other literature of the late Middle Ages. For example, in his 
account of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the Cursor Mundi 
poet begins by pointing out that God is owed respect because He is the 
uncreated creator:

Alle men owe bat lord to drede
bat made man to hauve made
bat euer was & euer shal be4

The ideas of the everlasting aspect of God's nature, of His function as 
creator, and of the reverence and obedience therefore owed to Him are 
repeated in various phrases throughout the next three hundred and fifty 
lines of this poem.

Throughout the forty-seven plays of the York cycle there runs a 
continual reminder that God is the everlasting maker of humankind.
Although He is not always present to draw the conclusion that therefore 
"als I byd sall it be," the logic remains valid. Each time the concept 
of God is evoked in the Play, it serves as an implicit reminder not only 
that obedience is owed to this being, but also that any attempt to 
frustrate His will is an act of futility.

Part of the didactic purpose for the medieval performances of Corpus 
Christi drama was to assert that the creator exists. Although the 
performers could not present actual miracles as evidence for this fact, 
the plays nevertheless were produced in the presence of evidence which 
was, if less spectacular, at least not less concrete than an actual 
miracle. The cycles were staged, after all, under the very sky and sun,

4Southern Version of Cursor Mundi, ed. S. Horral (Ottawa: 
on the very earth, by and among the very kinds of creatures which are mentioned in the plays of the Creation. Clifford Davidson speculates about the possible simplicity of props for the York play of the Creation of heaven and earth:

When God creates fishes and birds, for example, he minimally would be required to do no more than to make the sign of blessing directed at perhaps two or three representations, made of wood, cloth, or alabaster, which would make their appearance at the appropriate moment.\(^5\)

But naturally the world provided countless additional "props." Play II gives an answer to the question of how these things came to be; conversely, their very existence was considered evidence for the reality of the creator. The basic setting of the plays was an omnipresent reminder of the existence of God.

Verbal repetition also provides the same kind of reminder. The York characters address God in a number of ways. The angel who expels Adam and Eve from the garden calls Him "God of heuen" (VI, 2). The angel who commands Abel and Cain to present sacrifices refers to Him as "Allmyghty God of myghtes moste" (VII, 12). To the repentant wife of Noah He is, somewhat anachronistically, "bat lord bat giffes all grace, /bat kyndly bus cure care wolde kele" (IX, 197-8). God is known as "heuenes kyng" (IX, 254), and " youre frende" (XI, 367). Once the plays of the New Testament episodes begin and Jesus is known to be the second member of the Trinity, the list of possible titles of God increases.\(^6\) However, despite the great number of possible ways to address God, we find His


\(^6\) For example XVI, 322: "floure"; XVI, 339: "dike"; XXXVI, 311: "sauicoure", etc.
roles of everlasting being and creator of the world referred to throughout the plays. The first words of the seraphim in Play I are these: "A, mercyfull maker, full mekill es bi mighte, /bat all this warke at a worde worthless has woegethe" (41-2). The first words of the first human beings point out the relationship between the creative aspect of God and their desire to worship Him:

Adam  
A, lorde, full mekill is bi mighte  
And bi, is sene in ilke a sycle,  
For now his here a joyful syght  
To se bi woride so lange and wyde.

Many divers thynge now here es,  
Off bestis and foulis bathe wylde and tame;  
Yet is man made to bi likenes  
But we alone — A, louyd by bi name ...

Eve  
And selcouth thynge may we se here  
Of bi, ilke wylde so lange and brade,  
With bestis and foulis so many and sere;  
Blessid be he bat hase us made.

(III, 45-52; 57-60)

Abel's first speech illustrates the same point:

Gramercy God, of thy goodnes  
That me on moide has marked bi man,  
I worshippe be with worthynes ...

(VII, 34-6)

Noah in Play IX, Abraham in Play X, and Moses in Play XI all begin their first speeches with references to either the creative or the everlasting aspect of God's nature. References to God as the unmade maker continue in the plays of the New Testament with, for example, the third shepherd in Play XV (25), the Magi in Play XVI (57, 69, 81), the Prisbeter in Play XVII (2), Joseph in Play XVIII (1), the first pilgrim in Play XL (1), and God in the opening line of the final episode.

As may be seen by the varied titles, obedient characters worship God
not only because He is their everlasting creator, but also because He is their comforter, saviour, law-giver, and sovereign. Any mention of God is an implicit reminder of the reasonableness of obedience to His will. However, the fact of His eternal, creative nature forms the primary reason for the loyalty of His creatures; it is the title with which He introduces Himself in the opening lines of the cycle; it is the perfection from which all His other perfections issue. Recognition of God as unmade maker is the first step toward a life of faith for Longeus, the blind soldier of Play XXXVI. When he pierces Christ with his sword at Pilate's command, Longeus is touched by the blood from Christ's wound and thereby regains his sight. His first words are these: "O, maker unmade, full of myght ..." (300). A miracle causes him to believe that Jesus is God, the full declaration of which begins with a reference to the primary fact of His being.

The opening verses of the first play, then, evoke a broad but specific context for all the ensuing episodes, what I shall call the "cosmological" context; the primary fact of a hierarchical model of the universe is established: God, the uncreated creator, is the zenith of all being. The rest of Play I fills in both the vertical and horizontal aspects of this context which governs the entire cycle. At this point I shall outline how this happens; a more detailed reading of Play I is given later in this chapter.

Play I stages the creation of angels and the subsequent fall of Lucifer. Two tiers of spiritual being are thus fixed for eternity: the obedient angels, by virtue of their right response to the creator, occupy the tier nearest to God; Lucifer and the devils, because of their
absolutely wrong response, occupy the lowest rung on the hierarchicaal
ladder, that is, hell, the place farthest from the creator. That these
are static places on the eternal scale is made known in the last speech
of Deus:

For sum ar fallen into fylthe bat evermore sall fade þam,
And never sall have grace for to gyryth þam.
So passande of power than thought þam.
Thai wolde noght me worschip þat wroghte þam;
For þi sall my wreth euver go with þam.

Ande all that me wyrschippe sall wone here, iwyys ...

(I, 132-7)

Next, God states that He will create humankind on earth:

Forthi more:forthe of my warke, wyrke nowe I will.
Syn than þer mighte es for-narryde þat mente all omys,
Euen to myne owne fygyre þis blys to fulfyll,
Mankynde of moulde will I make.
But fyrst here I forour hym before
All thyng that sall hym restore,
To whilke þat his talente will take.

(138-44)

Since Lucifer and the devils are forever cast out of heaven for their
wrong behaviour (138), God will make "mankynde of moulde" in order to
fulfill "þis blys" (140-1). He will also create the "thyngs" which will
"restore" man (142-3); He begins by separating day from night (145-56).
God has filled in the middle spaces.

The chain of being is planned; the vertical aspect of the
"cosmological" context is evoked. But the fact that God states His
intention to create another type of being on earth adumbrates the
horizontal aspect of the context — the plot of the cycle. We have seen
that the creation of angels presented a situation of choice; it is
reasonable, then, to expect that the creation of humankind will present
the same situation in which the decision to do God's will has dire consequences. Each member of the audience knows the outline of Christian history: humankind will fall; the cycle will tell the story of the consequence of and remedy for that wrong response; throughout earthly time, each human being will face the same choice. Individual responses to the vertical concept of hierarchy — sin or goodness — become the bases of the plots of most episodes. The plot of the entire cycle is the story of the remedy for the original wrong response by man and woman to creator; the York Play tells the story of the act of redemption by which a gateway back into a paradise of peaceful stasis is provided.

At either end of both the vertical plane, which forms the "cosmological" context for each episode, and the horizontal plane, which is the plot that tells of right and wrong responses to the hierarchy, are static tiers: God and angels at the top of the hierarchy, Lucifer at bottom; God before the beginning of time, each being fixed in its place after judgment. The episodes between Play I and Play LXVII tell the story of the ground between these static ends, the story of the flux of continual choice played out over time.

The archetypal sin, the ultimate vice, is rejection of the creator. Whereas many contemporary Christian thinkers have an idea of sin which emphasizes the development of an individual's integrated personality, for centuries Christians thought of sin as something "not purely personal ... but a violation through self-will of the universal order, unity, and law."7 In The Inferno, the last circle just above the centre of hell

includes souls who have committed "treachery against those to whom they
were bound by special ties." The lowest of the four rings in circle nine
belongs to those who committed treason against their master. Ciardi
writes this of Dante's arrangement of circle nine, of the huge frozen
lake:

This is Dante's symbolic equivalent of the final guilt. The
treacheries of these souls were denials of love (which is God) and
of all human warmth. Only the remorseless centre of the ice will
serve to express their natures.9

According to Ciardi's reading of the poet's symbolism, then, the worst
sins were denials of God. To be a traitor to one's master was not only
to repudiate that specific authority, but also to disregard the natural
scale of being. Since the whole structure of medieval thought and the
whole organization of medieval society were based on acceptance of the
creator as source of the scale of being, a denial of His existence would
be a threat to the civilized world itself. Tierney writes this about the
failure of the papacy to command general support for its policies at the
end of the thirteenth century:

Medieval civilization at its best was profoundly Christian in
inspiration. As we have seen, its art, literature, and institutions
were all rooted in a common religious belief. If that belief
crumbled away, the whole society might crumble.9

Besides being a travesty against society, the ultimate vice, denial of
the creator, was a threat to individual psychological stability. For a
believer the loss of faith in God would undermine the meaning of

---

8John Ciardi translation of The Divine Comedy (New York: W. W.
Norton & Co. Inc., 1977), p. 166. Satan, of course, is at the centre of
hell.

9Brian Tierney and Sidney Painter, Western Europe in the Middle Ages
existence and the explanation for the disturbing presence of suffering in life; to threaten or even to question a believer's truth was to attempt to take away his/her ground for peace of mind. Absolute rejection of God, the ultimate vice, was a sin against both universal and personal stability.\(^{10}\)

So it makes sense that Lucifer's breach of hierarchy, that is, his failure to praise his maker and his substitution of self-praise for that legitimate worship, not only causes his own eternal suffering, but already effects the newly created earth. At the end of Play I, God tells the good angels:

Ande in my fyrste makyng, to mustyr my mighte,
Sen erthe es vayne and voyde and myrknes emel,
I byd in my blyssyng phe aungels gyf lyghte
To pe erthe, for it faded when pe fendes fell.

(145-8)

These lines foreshadow the dire consequences which Satan's sinful choice will soon have for humankind; they also work as a symbol for the emergence of evil, darkness, from perfect creation: the fundamental rift in the created order has universal effects. Likewise, Adam's and Eve's rejection of their creator's will has implications for every other human being in the cycle. When the ideal hierarchical stasis is once disturbed by rejection, a thread comes loose in the fabric of creation; disorder is the result, disorder which necessarily entails such imperfections as misery, pain, death.

In the context of the Corpus Christi cycle, the ultimate sin is

\(^{10}\)Cf. Morton Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan State College Press, 1952), p. 75. He discusses pride, "the sin of exaggerated individualism" which "struck at the roots of society."
rejection of the creator, failure to act according to one's place as creature. One feature of the sin of Lucifer is its universality; another is its profound illogicality, a feature which I shall explore over the next few pages. 11 This juxtaposition between those who respond properly to the authority of the unmade maker and those who do not recurs throughout the plays of the cycle until, in the final episode, Christ separates humankind into two groups: those who will dwell in heaven, and those who will dwell in hell. This judgment is based on the criterion of service to God; as God of Play LXVII puts it: "his day per domys pus have I dight /'To ilke a man as he hath serued me" (79-80). Jesus later states that He comes to judge the deeds of all human beings (230).

Collier writes:

... when God's act is fulfilled in time at the Last Judgment, the saved and the damned will be separated according to how they responded to this commandment [i.e., to do "God's will"] and how they conformed themselves to Christ's example. 12

I would argue that this statement is perhaps misleading: here Collier makes a distinction between doing God's will and conforming to Christ's example. Certainly, in the York episodes drawn from New Testament tradition and including the Judgment, the virtue of Christ-like charity receives emphasis; so does faith in the divinity of Christ. But these two virtues are part of what I see as a more general characteristic: the virtue of living in accordance with God's will, which, as we have seen,


is the same as a proper, and I shall now argue, logical response to the
divine hierarchy. In Chapter III more will be said concerning this shift
from Old Testament time ethics to New Testament time ethics; for now I
only wish to point out the idea of all specific acts of goodness as
manifestations of a proper or logical response to rank as creature.

More precisely, Collier writes that "directly or indirectly, the
commandment to do God's will comes to all the characters in the plays."13
I emphasize the word indirectly for I believe that here Collier is
referring to what I call implicit "commands", such as the inevitable
requirement for the angels to praise their maker. After creating nine
orders of angels (22-3), God makes no direct command; rather, He states
His will:

In be whilke blys I byde at be here
Nyen ordres of aungels full clere,
In louynyng ay-lastande at lowte me.

(I, 22-4)

In other words, He has created the angels in order that they may praise
Him. He says no more; they simply begin to worship; the text states:
"Tunc cantant angelli, 'Te deum laudamus, te dominum confitemur'." They
are created to praise; therefore, their praise follows logically from
God's act of creation. To praise is an unspoken obligation required by
their very essence.

Lucifer and his followers, on the other hand, replace worship of
their creator with self-worship. Moreover, they twist God's assurances
in order to suit their own self-images. Lucifer says: "More fayrear be

13Collier, "The Action of Fulfillment in the York Corpus Christi
Play," p. 35.
far pan my feres, / In me is no poynte hat may payre ..." (53-4). He seems to be repeating the promise which God had made when He singled Lucifer out just twenty lines before. God said:

Of all pe mightes I haue made, moeste nexte after me
I make pe als master and menour of my mighte;
I beede pe here baynely in blys for to be,
I name pe for Lucifer, als berar of lyghte.

Nothyng here sall pe be derand;
In pis blis sall be zhour beeldigyn,
And haue all walth in zoure weledyn,
Ay-whils zhe ar buxumly berande.

(33-40)

God has promised Lucifer that "Nothyng here sall be be derande"; this is what Lucifer is assuming in his speech cited above; but the angel's reasoning is not sound: he ignores the condition which God placed on that promise: "ay-whils zhe ar buxumly berande". Lucifer assumes, rather illogically, that no matter what may come to pass, he will never "payre". The Second Bad Angel copies his master's sloppy thinking: "Me nedes for to noy me righte noghte, / Here sall never payne me be

About the York play of the Fall of Angels, Rosemary Woolf points out that Lucifer "is shown to fall not as a penalty or judgment imposed by God, but as the inevitable consequence of what he himself says: God is present but silent." The York Play I presents the fall with these lines:

14Smith attributes this same speech to Lucifer (I Angelus Deficiens). In that case, it would be another example of Lucifer's illogical claims. (See Bibliography for further information on the Smith edition of The York Cycle.)

Lucifer: There shall I set myselfe full semely to seyghte,
To ressayue my reverence thorowre righte o renowne;
I shall be lyke unto hym pat es hyeste on heghte.
Owe, what I am derworth and deste — Owes! Dewes! All
goes downe!

(89-92)

We do not know for sure whether the actor portraying God would have made any gesture at this point. However, if, as Woolf believes, the silence of God means that Lucifer falls simply as a consequence of what he says, this fact emphasizes the illogicality of his pride in the same way that the fact that the seraphim begin to worship God without an explicit command reminds us that praising God is the inevitable result of accepting the divine hierarchy; it is the logical requirement of creatureliness.

God's description of the two types of behaviour which he expects from the first created beings invites us to reflect on the way that logic, disobedience, and improper response to the fact of creation are fused in medieval tradition. As He creates three tiers of spatial reality, God says:

Here underneath me nowe a nexeile I seuen,
Whileke ile shall be erthe. Now all be at ones
Erthe halie, and helle, pis hegheste be seuen,
And that welth shall welle sall won in pis wones.
This graunte I zowe, mynstiers myne,
To-whils zhe ar stabill in thoghte —
And also to paime bot ar noghte
Be put to my presone at pyne.

(25-32, emphasis mine)

He distinguishes between those who are "stabill in thoghte" — the angels who may remain in heaven -- and "paine pat ar noghte" — the angels who must be put to "preson." At the end of the next verse come God's parallel words to Lucifer, which I have quoted above (p. 18); He tells
Lucifer that he will remain in "blis" as long as he is "buxumly berande."

Thus, being "stabil in thoughte" and being "buxumly berande" are the
criteria (or perhaps criterion) for remaining in heavenly bliss. This
fact reflects the idea that to be obedient (buxumly berande) is to be
logical, stable in thought. In fact, Beadle translates both terms as
"obedient." 16

The great divide between the rebellious and the godly begins. Those
who are stable in thought are obedient; those who are not stable in
thought are, obviously by the very nature of the term, confused. In Play
XLII, The Ascension, Andrew, shortly after Jesus disappears on a cloud,
points out the logical outcome to having witnessed such a scene:

 Nowe may per Jewes be all confused
  If þai on-thinke þame inwardly,
 Nowe falsely þei haue hym accused
  And sakles schente thurgh þer envy.
  þer falsed, þat þei longe haue vsed,
 Nowe is it proued here opynly;

(241-6)

This miracle proves that Jesus is God; it is therefore illogical,
"confused", to assert otherwise. The Middle English Dictionary gives the
following meanings for "confused":

1. a) frustrated; ruined; b) damned 2. a) perplexed,
disconcerted, upset; befuddled; b) embarrassed, humiliated,
disgraced. 17

Although these meanings are not necessarily listed in order of
prevalence, 18 they demonstrate that the concepts of logical confusion and

16See Beadle's glossary.


18Kurath and Kuhn, Introduction, p. 3. 1954.
damnation are close in medieval writings. Just as stability in thought implies obedience to God, instability in thought, confusion, carries with it the idea of separation from the divine, sin. In Boethius' "Consolation of Philosophy," for example, Lady Philosophy builds her argument with which to convince the despairing Boethius to regain his hope on the fact that God is his creator. "You are confused because you have forgotten what you are ..."19 She tells him. Her next step in consoling him is to establish the truth that since God is the source of being, the world is governed by reason, not fate.

Two principles I have treated thus far, the "cosmological" context and the unreasonable nature of rejection of the creator, help to illuminate two critical attitudes toward Corpus Christi drama: the first about violence, and the second about humour. Viewed in terms of the context evoked by Play I, sin is absurd. As Ashley sees sin in the Towneley cycle, it is portrayed as "an incongruity, an inability or unwillingness to unite with the order of things, a falling away from perfection rather than a positive energy."20 Thus, she maintains that

Understanding the relation of evil to the divine order should also help us clarify the question of how wicked intent and brutality can function as comedy within the framework of a religious experience.21 She explores, in connection with the Towneley plays, the idea that the absurdity of sin renders evil characters farcical and ultimately impotent. I shall apply this idea to examples from the York Play and to

---


21 Ashley, p. 46.
recent comments concerning farce and violence in Corpus Christi drama.

Some critics treat comedy in the plays as gratuitous. For example, David Staines traces the development of both tragic and comic portrayals of Herod, and he places the York Herod in the latter category, remarking that "laughter becomes the aim of these plays."\(^{22}\) He holds that the playwrights who presented a comic Herod have given in to the preference of their audience for farce.\(^{23}\) While I do not argue with the idea that the authors of the plays might have been encouraged to write farce by the laughter of their audience, I shall point out that humour is not usually wholly gratuitous in the plays; rather, it is often thematically relevant.

The evil characters often evoke derision because their refusal to obey is illogical, absurd. Lucifer's fall menaces every human being by introducing evil into creation and by providing the temptation for Adam and Eve to revoke their right to live in Paradise; at the same time, the devil is at the same time a ludicrous figure. In the opening play of the York cycle, Lucifer seems ridiculous because he is so obviously mistaken. Just after one sees and hears God demonstrate and declare His absolute power, one witnesses Lucifer's pitiful self-aggrandizements. Lucifer's mistaken self-confidence is comical because of its juxtaposition with the truth.

Of course, the audience knows where Lucifer will end up for his mistake; therefore, we find the distance which irony provides between


\(^{23}\)Staines, p. 229.
character and audience, and which may evoke laughter, pity, or dismay; in this case, perhaps all three. In these plays, the failure of any character to recognize the creator and His power produces an irony which is generated by the context I have already discussed in this chapter, an irony we might therefore describe as cosmological. Each time a character disobeys God's will, the viewers realize the implications of the act in a way in which the sinner obviously does not; the audience judges the act against the backdrop of Christian truth and therefore is able to see the absurd illogicality and impotence involved.

Although it was believed that the fall of Lucifer had dire consequences, the York Fall of the Angels does not treat the devil along the lines of the tradition which "confers upon the devil the human dignity of one who grieves for intolerable loss." We see, rather, "the degradation of the devil ... into a brutish and contemptible figure ..."24 The scene in hell actually resembles slapstick comedy: the devils call Lucifer names; they beat him as he begs for respite. Despite the seriousness of the occasion, the initial breach of hierarchy is portrayed as laughable. Laughter is the response the moment of the fall produced in the audience when the Towneley cycle was staged in Toronto in May, 1985. I assume that medieval audiences would have been able to see the York fall as laughable because, believing in the cosmological hierarchy, they would have seen Lucifer's mistake as so blatantly unreasonable and impotent as to render it absurd. In the next chapter, I shall come back to the impotency of rebellion in connection with the

24Woof, The English Mystery Plays, p. 109-110 (referring to all four cycles).
characterization of the tyrants.

Awareness of cosmological irony invites a reading in which, in many cases, violence is functional rather than gratuitous. Not all critics allow for this type of interpretation of some of the more gruesome of the episodes. In her 1980 article, "Merrie England? ... Contradictory Interpretations of the Corpus Christi Plays," Harriet Hawkins brings up several issues concerning the drama and explores conflicting attitudes to these questions without necessarily seeking to resolve them. Violence in the plays, however, is one issue about which she seems to have made up her mind. "How are we to take the grotesque fun and games involved in the slaughter of the innocents or the pageants of the Crucifixion?" 25 she asks, and devotes the remaining pages of her article to the answer; eventually she wonders if the violence does not "undermine the higher message of these particular plays," and asks "is not moral judgment what the cycles are all about?" 26 Between question and answer her argument proceeds. She begins by claiming that not all evil-doers are punished for their crimes:

But unlike the Coventry Herod, the Wakefield Herod does not learn that his deeds have come to naught. He does not learn that his own son has been killed. Nor does he himself face death. The Wakefield Master invents no new punishment in Hell or on earth for this particular tyrant. 27

Next, she rejects Kolve’s idea that the use of game and play in scenes

26 Hawkins, p. 194.
such as the crucifixion leads to aesthetic distance. Hawkins counters that

the gleeful relish in the torturers' work is to me, at least, a terrifying reminder that human beings did take just such pleasure in the suffering of others - and still do. This causes her to wonder whether vices do not become "theatrical virtues" and thus vitiate the moral message of the individual plays.

Hawkins, it seems, does not read the plays with the suspension of disbelief which allows one to appreciate the irony which is involved in these violent scenes. After all, every Herod does face death in every one of the cycles; every Herod does learn that his deeds have come to nought. Perhaps these events do not happen within the dramatic action of an individual Herod play; however, they do take place in the context which remains a constant backdrop for each episode. Each time a character fails to do God's will, the audience is able to judge him/her as a sinner, one standing outside of the heavenly kingdom, inviting damnation. Collier writes this about the use of "bad" exemplars:

there are ... teachers in the plays who try to frustrate the will of God by misinterpreting it - ones whom the audience is also asked to recognize, and reject. Collier shows how the overall cycles provide, eventually, a statement of the truth against which the audience may judge an individual character:

although this discrepancy and the irony to which it gives rise are at time disturbingly prolonged, always they are resolved in a triumphant acknowledgment and statement of the truth that brings the audience and characters together to reward and strengthen the


29Hawkins, p. 193.

30Collier, Poetry and Drama, p. 69.
audience's acceptance of what the plays teach them. 31

But in one way the discrepancy is not "disturbingly prolonged," because
the context of creation and judgment is always present before the mind of
the viewer.

The York Crucifixion provides an example of how cosmological irony
renders a scene of violence thematically relevant. 32 Reading this play
with the following two premises in mind, premises established by the
play's location within the plot of the cycle and also within the vertical
context of Christian drama, enables one to see the violence as
functional: 1) God exists; 2) Jesus, who is God, is being sacrificed
for the sin of Adam.

The behaviour of the torturers is brutal; it is also ludicrous.
They follow the authority of a mere earthly ruler, Pilate, and thereby
put to death their own creator and judge. They obviously do not
recognize these facts, and the audience is aware of their blindness;
therefore, a tone of irony runs throughout the episode. Hawkins takes
exception to Kolve's comment that "after all, they do not know who it is
they are torturing"; she notes that in the Towneley version, the first

31Collier, Poetry and Drama, p. 77.

32Ashley points out the two levels of irony dominant in the Towneley
crucifixion (pp. 49-52). The torturers' "obliviousness to the horror of
what they are about to do is matched by the fierce irony of the
situation" (i.e., its role in the plan of redemption), p. 52. See also
Jeanne S. Martin, "History and Paradigm in the Towneley Cycle,"
Medievalia & Humanistica, 8 (1977), 125-45 for a discussion of the game-
playing and irony in the crucifixion scene. In "The Action of
Fulfillment" Collier makes general comments on how defiance of God's will
produces an irony which "colors all the portraits of those who work
against God" (p. 35-6).
soldier says, "We know full well what we do." But this line in the Towneley crucifixion is ironic: the audience realizes that the soldiers do not know what they are doing; they are not aware of the universal significance of their actions. In the York crucifixion, although no torturer uses those words, the four soldiers are just as blind. This is true, moreover, at two levels and therefore two types of irony run throughout the play. First, their inaccurate appraisal of the situation at hand shows up in the soldiers' complaints about the bragging and "jangling" of Jesus; secondly, the soldier's ignorance of the significance of their work is revealed. We have examples of both a specific, limited irony as well as of a cosmological irony; many statements have triple significance: one literal, and two ironic.

The soldiers talk constantly during the scene. The dialogue passes among the four; each speaks usually either a two or three line segment. In contrast, Jesus has only two speeches, each of which lasts twelve lines, or the length of a stanza. The soldiers seem to be gabbling, often needlessly, as they work. Yet, early in the play, IV Miles begins a complaint about Christ which will be repeated near the end of the episode. He says:

Late dyng he doone, ban is he done -
He schall nought dere vs with his dynt

(17-8)

thus attributing to Christ the annoying habit of chattering which belongs to the soldiers throughout the scene. Much later, when Jesus has just finished his second speech, the torturers complain:

I Miles  We, harke, he jangelis like a jay.
II Miles  Methynke he patris like a py.
III Miles  He has ben doand all pis day,
           And made grete mesyng of mercy.

(265-8)

The same type of irony appears in regard to the false self-aggrandizement of the soldiers. They boast of their own boldness (31) but the audience soon witnesses their complaints about the work of lifting the cross (185-95). If the audience has seen the play which comes immediately before the crucifixion episode, or if they know the story of The Road to Calvary, then the fact that four men complain about lifting the cross and body contrasts to the patience of Christ when he is made to carry the same cross along the road and up the hill. In The Road to Calvary, Waymond (III Miles) has the cross made and then brings it to the soldiers who are guarding Jesus. Waymond does not want to carry it any further. He asks: "But whiche of yowe schall beere pis tree, / Sen I haue broughte it hedier?" I Miles answers "Be my feithe, bere it schall hee / ßat beron hanged sone schall bee" (97-9). Jesus does not protest. In fact, in the twenty lines which he eventually speaks in this play, he worries not about his own suffering but about the mourning of others:

Doughteres of Jerusalem cytté,
Sees, and mournes no more for me,
But thynkes vpon this thyng:
For youreselfe mourne schall zee,

(160-5)

etc.

The soldiers force Symon to carry the cross for a stretch, but not because Jesus complains; rather, because he displays an inability to get
the task done: "He swounes" (225). In the Crucifixion, I Miles
complains that lifting the cross has put his "schuldir in soundre" (190)
and III Miles claims that the task will "brekis" his "bakke" (194); just
before these complaints, the soldiers have actually broken the bones and
sinews of Christ in order to fit him to the poorly measured cross (107-8;
113-4; 131-2; 145-8); during these events, Christ does not speak one word
of reproach.

The soldiers boast of their talent in performing the crucifixion
(104, 195-200), but the audience sees their ineptitude in lifting the
cross. In The Crucifixion, we hear that the job is botched other ways as
well. The distance between nails is too great (107-12) and the mortice
is of the wrong size (231, ff.). These details contrast with the
soldiers' confident self-congratulation in this episode. As well, the
details contrast with similar speeches in the previous play. There, the
three soldiers admire their proficiency in obtaining such a tree; III
Miles assures everyone that all measurements are precise: "To loke
therafter is no rede / I toke be mesure or I yode, / Bothe for pe fette
and hende" (79-82). Whereas the torturers accuse Jesus of boasting in
his claim to be God's son (269-70), the audience knows that these
soldiers are the real braggarts and that the victim's claim is truth.34

The irony which results from the torturers' complaints about Jesus'
"jangling" is, for the most part, specific to the occasion, but as we see
from the last example, the specific irony of their own boasting dovetails
with a broader irony which exists throughout the plays of the Trials and

34Their bragging and their ineptitude also contrast with the
humility and success of those servants of God such as Noah and Moses.
into the play of the Ascension. Many characters remain blind to the fact of Christ's divinity and his role in the redemption of humankind; thereby, words spoken by the enemies of Christ take on special meanings, unrealized by the speaker but evident to the audience. The more obvious examples of this irony are explicit references to what the enemies of Christ view as his false claims to divinity. In other places, double meaning is less explicit, but is still recognizable by anyone with knowledge of Christian tradition. Consider these lines, spoken by II Miles in the episode of the crucifixion: "The foulest deed of all / Shalle he dye for his dedis" (21-2). We know that Christ dies for humankind's deeds (sins). The literal meaning of these lines spirals outward to the allegorical meaning. Similarly, the same speaker later says: "This works is wele, I will warnede" (103). This line may be understood in several ways; it is ironic because the soldiers do not do their job efficiently, because their work is a moral travesty (putting to death an innocent man), because they are brutally killing their own creator, saviour, judge, but also because the work is done well in so far as it advances the plan of redemption. When they are having difficulty lifting the cross, IV Miles curses: "He deviill hym hang!" (188), another line which reveals layers of meaning: Christ hangs because the devil tempted Eve, therefore the devil does hang him; but in hanging, Christ 'hangs' the devil. In this episode, many other lines have this reverberating quality due to the various levels of ironic meaning.\textsuperscript{35} The irony invites the viewers and readers to recognize the double blindness of the enemies of Christ: their proud but mistaken sense of their own

\textsuperscript{35}For example, see 11. 89-90, 141-2, 149-50, 157-8, 207.
competence is, as was Lucifer's pride before his fall, a symptom of their blindness to "cosmological" reality, which in this case is the truth of Jesus' claim to divinity.

Hawkins wonders whether the fun and games connected with this scene might lead a viewer to take pleasure in brutality rather than to judge it. I maintain that even if it does the former, it also does the latter: that is, viewers may find themselves enjoying the cruelty of the soldiers, but they must also judge the soldiers as sinners, blind to truth and separated from the omnipotent creator/saviour/judge. Thus, if we happen to enjoy the violence, if we happen to find ourselves sympathizing with the soldiers who kill Christ, given the context of the episode, we are forced to judge ourselves in the same way that we judge the enemies of the creator: responsible for his death and in need of forgiveness. The crucifixion scene, in this case, employs the method of indirect teaching, teaching by bad exemplar.

The broad context which gives extra-literal meaning to many of these lines allows me to judge myself as well as to judge each character in the York cycle. Because of what I as viewer/reader know about the Christian story, about the universe in which all the characters exist, I am privileged to be able to see how each person presented fits into the divine pattern. By means of its context, then, each play invites the audience to judge its characters as belonging on one or the other side of the great divide between those who respond properly and those who respond improperly to their rank as created being.

Kolve, in *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, divides his discussion of characterization into two chapters. The first of these he entitles
"Natural Man and Evil," and the second he calls "Goodness and Natural Man." At the beginning of his chapter on goodness, Kolve claims that, despite their inherent propensity toward evil,36 "God's Chosen" share one basic quality: "That quality is obedience, and until Christ's ministry, human goodness is made known chiefly in its simple terms."37 After naming this basic trait, Kolve goes on to list and explore several other characteristics which he sees as belonging to good characters in the four cycles. In the preceding chapter on evil, he has done the same sort of listing and exploring of character traits, but without naming any ultimate vice belonging to the evil-doing characters which might correspond to the trait of obedience shared by the good. I hope to show that an analysis of Kolve's list reveals just such a corresponding ultimate vice. The traits that he names as peculiar to the characters who do evil are symptoms of a basic feature: a confused response to the macrocosmic order; moreover, these traits apply to the York characters who do evil.

First, I shall list the traits which Kolve attributes to the men and women who do evil. These characters have exuberant vitality; they possess a store of energy which seeks release in any direction; therefore, they take orders but do not necessarily understand the ultimate meaning of their decisions to obey. The world of evil is marked by noise, brawling, chaos, and impatient demands for silence; it is a world not inherently organized: order must be imposed on it from its leaders. The evil-doers are willing to be corrupted. They are as

36 Due to their fallen nature.
37 Kolve, p. 238.
incapable of recognizing good as they are of preferring it. These characters hate pretension and they repay what they see as the pride of others by means of public indignity. They have a propensity to declare an end to their responsibility if a situation becomes too difficult or if it threatens their lives, and they display a tendency toward an even deeper declaration of irresponsibility: they tend to see the divine as categorically irrelevant to their lives. As I examine a number of the evil characters in terms of their responses to the hierarchy, I shall refer to Kolve’s list in order to demonstrate how the attributes he names are part of the overall division between characters who do and characters who do not respond properly to the divine hierarchy; between characters who do and characters who do not act reasonably in light of their inevitable rank as creature.

We have seen how Lucifer’s response to his creator is illogical: whereas the good angels base their confidence on their creator’s power, Lucifer relies only on himself; because he praises himself rather than God, Lucifer seems to look to himself as the source of his own brightness. On pronouncing these words of usurpation, Lucifer falls: “I sell be lyke unto hym pat es hyeste on heghte. / Owe, what I am derworth and defte —” (91-2).

His is the prime example of a perverted response to hierarchy for not only is he the first to fall, but he also falls farther than any other being will – from heaven to hell. God gives the Angel of Light a place near the summit of the divine order; He says:

Of all pe mightes I haue made, moste nexte after me
I make pe als master and mercour of my mighte;

(33-4)

Lucifer is a spirit, pure intellect, and thus he is higher on the scale
than a being who has a body. Moreover, he rejects his creator after
actually dwelling with Him. For these reasons, perhaps, Lucifer is
plunged into irredeemable punishment. Human beings might hope for
salvation through Christ, but the question of salvation for the fallen
angels never arises. At the end of Play I, God decrees: "For I saул my
wreth ever go with pam" (136). Lucifer cannot be reconciled with
creation, for his is the principle of the rejection of being from the
moment that he denies his being, that is, his essence, his inevitable
place on the great scale. His pride is interdependent with confusion
about or rejection of the divinely decreed order.

As might be expected, most of the features which Kolve cites as
pertinent to the characterization of human beings tending toward evil
also belong to the York Lucifer of Play I and his devils in hell. The
bad angels are willing to be led. According to the Beadle edition of the
York plays, the speeches which follow God's words of creation pass from a
worshipping seraph to the bragging Lucifer, then to a worshipping cherub,
then to a second bad angel who copies Lucifer's style of self-praise.
According to this interpretation of which characters speak which lines,
once Lucifer praises himself, the second bad angel is quick to follow his
example. This sequence helps to make sense of the fact that along with
Lucifer in hell are other devils who blame him for their being there:

1 dedes to pis dole newe has dyghte us,
To spilla vus sou was cure specar,
For thow was cure lyghete andoure ledar,
In the Smith edition, on the other hand, both speeches of self-praise are attributed to Lucifer. However, the fact that the other devils are in hell because they followed the example of the Angel of Light is made clear at the end of the play when God tells the angels who remain in heaven:

That wolde noght me worship but wroghte ban;
For bi sall my wret huer go with ban.

By following Lucifer's example, the devils show that they share his lack of understanding. They are willing to be corrupted. Lucifer is incapable of recognizing the source of his goodness, or if he does recognize it, is incapable of preferring goodness to himself. Once in hell, he quickly declares an end to his responsibility for the suffering of the other devils; when they accuse him he tells them: "I wiste noght his wo schulde be wroghte" (115). Lucifer also manifests that tendency toward a deeper declaration of irresponsibility because he acts as if the divine is categorically irrelevant: unlike the good angels who preface every speech by addressing their maker, he does not once mention the name of God. Each of these traits is a symptom of Lucifer's rejection of divine hierarchy.

In Play V we see the implications for humankind of Satan's fall. In two different ways Adam and Eve pervert the hierarchy, first by attempting to usurp, as did Lucifer, and secondly, by lowering themselves to an unnatural position. Satan tells Eve:

---

39 See footnote 14, above.
For perille ryght per none in lyes,
    Bot worshippe and a grete wynnynge,
For right als God yhe shalle be wyse
    And pere to hym in all-kyn thynge.

(V, '67-70)

She should eat the fruit in order to put herself on a par with God in all ways. If she does so, he then tells her, she will have as much wisdom as God has. "Is pis soth pat pou sais?" she asks. Satan tells her it is, and immediately Eve agrees to taste the fruit. She then convinces her husband to join her in the forbidden meal by telling him:

    For we shalle be als wise
For we shalle be als wise
    Als God pat is so grete,
    Als God pat is so grete,
And als mekill of prise;
          And als mekill of prise;
      Forty ete of pis mete.
          Forty ete of pis mete.

(96-9)

Adam replies that he would eat the fruit if he could be sure that Eve speaks the truth. She tells him: "Byte on boldely, for it is trewe, / We shalle be goddis and knowe al thynge." He bites. Both the first man and the first woman commit a sin like Lucifer's sin: they attempt to raise themselves to the place which can belong to only the creator.

At the same time, Eve and then Adam violate the proper order in the opposite direction. Eve listens to a snake; from an animal she takes advice which is contrary to the commandment given to her by her maker. Her first clue that something is amiss is the fact that an animal uses language. She takes the right approach to the situation when she asks: "Why, what-kynne thynge art pou / Pat telles pis tale to me" (51-2). However, she quickly decides to believe the creature who appeals to her vanity, pride, and ambition. Adam makes a similar mistake by listening
to his wife, a being lower than himself on the hierarchy. He prefers the advice of another human being to the commandment of his creator, who has given him not only his life and his mate but also a beautiful paradise in which to dwell.

Neither Adam nor Eve has any good reason to believe the words of the serpent, but they are willing to be corrupted for the sake of a specious promise. Referring back to the Kolwe-list, we can say that the first man and woman, as well as being willing to be corrupted, are also willing to be led without taking time to understand the nature of their amenability. By taking advice from beings below themselves on the chain of being instead of obeying their Creator’s rule, Adam and Eve act as if God is irrelevant to their lives. They fail to recognize and prefer goodness. When God demands an explanation for their disobedience, Adam immediately blames Eve for his mistake: “Lorde, Eue garte me do wronge / And to pat bryg me broghte”; Eve in turn says: “A worne, lord, entysed me thertill” (142-3; 146). In other words, they are quick to declare an end to their responsibility for the sin. We have already seen, in connection with the play of the Fall of the Angels, how these characteristics are symptoms of a wrong response to the divine order.

As did Lucifer and Adam and Eve, Cain displays an attitude of indifference to his maker. Whereas Abel worries only about how to please God, Cain considers worship a waste of his time (VII, 60). In other ways, too, he manifests a perverted response to the divine order. When

---

40In Mystère d’Adam, the hierarchical implications are even more explicit. When Eve offers the apple to him, Adam replies: "I shall believe you, / You are my equal." See Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 126.
Abel urges him to present his tithes, Cain replies:

\[\text{Ya, dewell, methynkëp ñat werke were waste,}\
The \text{vs gaffe gaffe hym agayne}\
\text{To se ...}\
\text{If he be moste in myghte and mayne}\
\text{What neede has he?}\]

(60-2; 65-6)

Cain does not seem to understand that the sacrifices are given to God not to satisfy His material need, but rather to please Him. Cain talks about God as if He were any man.

These few examples show that the theme of disobedience is intertwined in the York play with the treatment of more fundamental kinds of rebellion which all turn out to be confusions about the created order. The basis of sin, the ultimate vice, is not necessarily pride, nor is it necessarily disobedience to a specific command. Rather, it is any unreasonable, or what I shall refer to as illogical, response to God involving any one of the symptoms on Kolve's list. In the following chapter, I shall explore the ways in which this idea of sin appears in such aspects of the York Play as mood, characterization, language, and theme, and thereby creates patterns which provide one reason to consider the York cycle a unified text.
CHAPTER II
"THE WORLD TURNED 'UPSIDOWN'": PATTERNS OF THEME, CHARACTERIZATION, MOOD, AND STYLE

In Chapter I, I discussed how in the York Play the basic theme, acceptance or rejection of God, and its corollary, the theme of obedience vs. disobedience, are based on the hierarchical context evoked by Play I, or by each reference to the creator, or by the very nature of the drama, that is, its medieval-Christian nature. In this chapter, I shall continue the reading of the cycle from this perspective by examining aspects of mood, theme, characterization, and style in terms of the relationship of each to the basic hierarchical model.

This reading of York, which finds a ground for patterns that render the forty-seven plays a coherent cycle, has implications for the problem of unity. Thematic coherence has been used as evidence for the existence of an author's or reviser's conscious intention to unify a cycle.

Regarding Towneley, Ashley writes:

Patterns of character and action, revealed when individual plays are read within the context of their cycle, suggest the work of a playwright/reviser concerned with the artistry and meaning of the entire cycle.¹

Also regarding Towneley, Gardner claims that

The argument for shaping of the whole play by a single man, or by one man in close supervision of a group of poet-revisers goes as follows: 1. Thematic control and unity of action.²

¹Ashley, "The Idea of Order in the Towneley Cycle," iii.

²John Gardner, The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle (Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 136. His two other main points are 2. Relative coherence of technique, and 3. Language. The summary of no. 1 runs: "The alternation of Christological and satanic materials, interspersed with simple devotional materials where no such allegorical extension is possible or desirable, makes the whole cycle a conflict of Christ and Satan which rises to a dramatic climax in the tragic-phase
The texts of the four cycles are anonymous results of long processes of multiple revisions. Yet, "Where we have not had identifiable authors, we have felt the need to invent them." It is difficult, after all, to examine an episode or a series of episodes in terms of intricate, often subtle, interrelationships of detail without implying, if not naming, individual intention as the source of the patterns. But an alternate way to explain the persistent marks of cohesiveness in Corpus Christi drama, without explicit or implicit reliance on the concept of individual intention, is to show that each of the patterns pertains to the hierarchical belief which was pervasive in the centuries during which the cycles were composed and performed.

While I do not want to undermine in any way the studies which concentrate on the uniqueness of a particular cycle, I do want to suggest that what I say concerning the York cycle's grounding in hierarchical context can be applied fruitfully to other Corpus Christi drama. I have found this true especially for the Towneley Play, perhaps because Ashley's dissertation, "The Idea of Order in the Towneley Cycle,"

pageants, focusing on the agon of Christ and his satanic opponent Pilate; the final pageants reverse the drama, presenting the triumph of good over evil, Christ over Satan."


For example, Gardner's, The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle; Collier's, Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play; Peter Travis', Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle.
covers many of the same themes and motifs which I highlight in York: sin as "inability to unite with the order of things," the resultant chaos and resultant disarray in hierarchical relationships, the impotence of earthly leaders, and the relevance of farce. One of the major differences in our points of view, however, is that whereas Ashley uses the patterns of theme, characterization, and mood to argue that at some point a hypothetical reviser or author intentionally made changes in or composed portions of the Towneley Play in order to unify the cycle, I shall use the same patterns in York to argue for the opposite hypothesis: because all the patterns are grounded in a traditional belief, it is possible that a corporate effort produced a coherent cycle. (See Conclusions.) Naturally, each cycle can have its unique uses of style, characterizations, themes, and other details, and at the same time express a belief common to each of the other cycles: while Wakefield was written and revised by different people than was York, all the authors shared a belief in the hierarchical view of the universe.

Since one cannot easily separate aspects of characterization, theme, mood, and style, I shall take a basically chronological path through the York cycle, discuss groups of plays in terms of various patterns, and point out how each pattern is based on the hierarchical context. First, I shall consider the theme of rebellion against divine order in the Old Testament plays in light of Davidson's recent work on patterns of theme and character in the York Old Testament episodes. This will lead to a consideration of the mood of chaos which recurs throughout the cycle and thus back to some of the traits of evil that Kolve listed. Intertwined

with the mood of chaos is the motif of disarray in master-servant relationships. The character of Pharaoh, in the last of the Old Testament episodes, begins the motif of the boastful tyrant, which continues in the New Testament episodes. Levels of style must be considered in relationship to the play of Herod and the Magi. Concerning Pilate, I shall discuss the question of how the method of portraying this character pertains to the hierarchical context of the cycle.

Much work has been done already on each of the above aspects. In Chapter I, we saw Kolve's arrangement of characterization into two distinct groups which form a broad pattern common to all the cycles. Woolf writes this, also concerning all four cycles:

In the plays of the Fable of the Angels patterns are begun which are to recur throughout the cycles. God and the good angels are necessarily characterless, but Satan's hollow displays of power and his delight in his own existence and beauty are later echoed in the speeches of Herod and of Pilate. Similarly the contrast between the dignity and tranquillity of heaven and the noise and agitation of hell, all visually, verbally, and metrically emphasized, begin one of the most important recurring themes in the cycles, which again will receive its climax at the Crucifixion.7

I mentioned that Ashley considered the themes of sin as separation from the divine order, resultant chaos, and the impotent tyrant in Towneley. Jeanne S. Martin proposes that two speech styles throughout the Towneley Play, one associated with Lucifer beginning in Play I and one associated with the good angels, provide the basis for reading two types of relationships which dominate the cycle: a relationship based on power and a relationship based on solidarity.8 For York, Collier has analyzed

---

7Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, p. 112.

styles as a "moral shorthand" to characterization. J. W. Robinson remarks the deliberate and repeated use of the convention of the boastful tyrant in York and other cycles. Clifford Davidson shows details of theme and characterization which run throughout the early York plays and which, later in this chapter, I shall examine for their connection with the hierarchical context of the cycle. What I want to do is to highlight each of these patterns in terms of how it expresses the hierarchical belief, that is, in terms of how it is grounded in the cosmological context of the cycle. At the same time, I want to explore the question of how several examples of recent criticism might be considered in light of this reading of the York Play.

The Old Testament episodes in York are explicitly concerned with the questions of doing God's will or of not doing God's will, which, as we have seen, are the proper and perverted responses to hierarchy. The pattern is more easily discerned in these stories than in the episodes from the Annunciation through the Judgment because the New Testament morality, which I shall discuss further in the next chapter, involves complications for the issues of law and commandment. In the plays about Lucifer, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Isaac and Abraham, Noah, Moses and Pharaoh, the right action is always the reasonable one: it is the action which puts the creator's will first. Sometimes the wrong response seems,

9Collier, Poetry and Drama, p. 98.

for a moment, logical, but always a flaw in the logic is revealed.11 Cain asks of God "What need has he?" (VII, 66). If God were a human being, we said, Cain's reasoning might be sound; however, God, as creator, deserves worshipful tithing, as Abel perceives (67-8). To Noe, her husband's ideas about arks and floods seem absurd, but it turns out that she is the one who is behaving illogically, as we shall see. Pharaoh may think it a ridiculous idea to let his Hebrew slaves have an extended holiday in the wilderness, but it is truly unreasonable to disobey the demands of a deity who displays His power by such devices as the timely blights which Pharaoh's magicians cannot duplicate. As we saw in Chapter I, the most logical behaviour takes into account the will of the ultimate authority who makes Himself known via creation and via His dreadful might in the Old Testament. The wrongdoers are blind to the ultimate realities which render their actions impotent and sinful; theirs is the perverted response, literally because it perverts the true order of authority. One way to describe the major issue of the Old Testament plays in the York cycle is as a dialectic between perverted and proper responses to the divine hierarchy.12

In choosing to describe the pattern which governs the York Old Testament episodes as a dialectic of hope and despair, Clifford Davidson chooses inadequate terminology. The pattern he describes fits better

---
11A common theme in medieval theological writing. See, for example, The Consolation of Philosophy, Book Five on the difference between human reason and divine knowledge.

12In this section, I use the words "illogical" and "unreasonable" not to refer to the failure of a character to use intellectual faculties; rather, I mean that from the audience's point of view, the wrong responses violate the basic Christian logic; see Chapter I.
into the framework which I have named above, a more general and therefore more fluid rubric for the same workings of characterization and theme which Davidson remarks. In "After the Fall," Davidson names the issue which runs throughout the plays in this way:

This pattern as set forth in the story of Adam and Eve involves an essential conflict between hope (nourished by obedience and overcoming despair to re-establish communication with God), and a despair which brings together all the negative aspects of the sin of Adam and Eve as observed in Plays V and VI of the York cycle.\(^{13}\)

Disobedience, alienation from God, blindness to evil, lack of respect for divine and human relationships are some of the traits he names as belonging to those who do not do God’s will: Cain, Pharaoh, for a time Uxor Noah. Obedience, piety, and trust belong to their opposites: Abel, Moses, Noah. As we discuss each of these characters, however, we will see that, contrary to Davidson’s argument, despair and hope are not necessarily the traits which are at the root of their goodness or sinfulness.

This is not to say that despair and hope are not elements of character present in most of the early York episodes. When Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden, life of fallen man begins; nature becomes hostile to the first human beings, as Adam notes:

Allas, for bale, what may his bee?  
In worlde vrwisely wrought haue we.  
This erthe hit trembleth for this tree  
And dyns ilke dele!  
Alle his worlde is wrothe with mee,  
Dis wote I wele.

(VI, 111-16)

Then, in Davidson's words:

\(^{13}\)Clifford Davidson, *From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (New York: AMS Press, 1984), p. 43.
The natural condition for man in such an existence seems to be joyless despair, yet the memory of paradise lost breeds a desire to return to felicity and a hope that through renewed obedience communication with the deity might bring about this happy end.  

Hopelessness is the concern of the Play VI, which is the last scene in the York cycle which presents Adam and Eve. The Angel expels them; he tells them: you must "abide and be in bittir bale / Till he pe borowe" (39-40). Adam replies by lamenting the forsaken bliss: Neither he nor Eve picks up on the last line above; they do not remark on or question when the time of "borrowing" might be. They are in despair. The Angel warns Adam and Eve about their punishments and during the next fifteen verses they bewail the sorrows of the new life; then they exchange some brief recriminations. Adam seems hopeful only once, when he says: "How beste will be, so haue Y blisse, / I shalle assaye" (109-110). He does not think optimistically for long. The next verse returns to the tone of woe. While we leave Adam and Eve in despair, this is not necessarily the beginning of a dialectic between hope and despair.

Of the fragments of the next play, for example, Davidson writes: "Hope and despair hence become 'the essential elements."  

His proofs that Abel is full of hope are Abel's obedience to God, his piety, and his recognition that God should have a proper offering. Certainly, hope is an element of Abel's faith. But Davidson's argument that Cain "from the very first" epitomizes despair is not as convincing. He cites these words of Cain: "Ya, daunce in pe devil way, dresse pe downe, / For I

---

14 Davidson, From Creation to Doom, p. 43.
15 Davidson, p. 43.
16 Davidson, p. 44.
wille wyrke even as I will" (52-3) and writes: "He substitutes his own will for the divine will, and hence becomes an emblem of disobedience to divine authority."17 While I agree with this reading of the significance of Cain's words, I do not agree that it demonstrates the fact that the key to Cain's attitude is despair. Of course, one might argue that only a human being unable to hope in paradise would disobey or ignore God. This is part of Davidson's point: despair is the term he uses to cover "all the negative aspects of the sin Adam and Eve" (see quotation cited on p. 45). He seems to be arguing that all sin and disobedience are rooted in a general perversion called despair. But despair (hopelessness; see, for example Kurath and Kuhn) is not the root of sin for Lucifer, or for Adam and Eve. Lucifer's pride causes his fall, just as that perverted response to the creator is the basis of the fall of man.18 None of these three has need for hope and none has cause for despair before they sin; they dwell with their creator in bliss. Not despair, then, but something more like what Kolve describes as a tendency to see the divine as irrelevant,19 or what I have called rejection of one's role as creature, causes these first three sins. And Cain resembles Lucifer: he ignores God, is proud, and is wilfully disobedient. He does not even seem to realize that there is something in the state of his existence which gives him the need to hope. This is a trait he shares with Uxor Noah and Pharaoh. Thus, while Davidson

17Davidson, From Creation to Doom, p. 44.


emphasizes Cain's sinfulness in relation to his fallen nature; I emphasize it in relation to the fall of Lucifer.

If the theme of despair as the root of sin is not made explicit in the York plays, what is made explicit, as we have seen in Chapter I, is Cain's misunderstanding of and indifference to the creator; his illogical response to his inevitable rank as creature. Despair is one of the symptoms of a perverted response, and thus Cain does display an attitude of hopelessness at the end of Play VII (118-21). He claims that he is exiled from human company forever; any man who sees him will kill him. The Angel assures Cain that any man who does violence against him will be punished. Then Cain's despair is, if not mitigated, at least tempered with the proud tone which all his speeches had at the play's opening; he finishes by cursing the angel (138-40). The curse suits Cain's hopelessness. However, the despair of Cain is not made explicit at the beginning of Play VII, and since the play survives only in fragments, we cannot know whether or not the hopelessness is introduced somewhere in the middle of the action. Thus, rather than name despair as the ground of Cain's behaviour, it is perhaps more accurate to say that despair is the result of his punishment; it is one of the symptoms of his perverted response to his role as creature.

While Davidson's basic terminology conflicts with my reading of the York Old Testament plays, his description of the obedient and disobedient strains of characterization does not. Cain is, as Davidson points out, wilfully disobedient, wilfully isolated, and blind.20 This latter is the same point which he makes about the stubborn Uzor Noah, whose

20Davidson, From Creation to Doom, p. 44, p. 44, p. 46.
unwillingness to board the ark is treated farcically: she complains shrewishly and even attempts to hit her husband. Davidson sees the farce as setting off the absurdity of those who, "self-deceived, fail to understand the desperation inherent in the fallen condition of man"; that is, as setting off their "wilfull blindness." 21 Uxor's attitude has much in common with Cain's. Her negative response to the requests and demands of the godly Noah remind one of Cain's responses to the godly Abel. When her sons come with the message from Noah to urge her to board the ark, she is quite obviously wrong to refuse; it has, after all, already been raining for forty days (IX, 85-6). She finally agrees to approach the ark, but still defies Noah's request that she board (79-81). She complains that she was not consulted about the ark-building (113, ff.), and threatens to give Noah a "clowte" (120). Her behaviour is not merely disobedient; it is also blind. Uxor is blind to the fact that forty days of rain signals an unusual turn of events. She is blind to the fact that the world deserves to be punished, for she is unable to discern that the holiness of her husband and the wickedness of mankind makes it right that Noah's family should be saved while others perish; she wonders why her friends are not included in the plan for salvation:

   Nowe certis, and we shulde skape fro skathe
    And so be saffyd as ye saye here,
    My commodrys and my cosynes bathe,
    Y am wolde I wente with us in feere.

(141-4)

On a metaphorical level, she may represent the natural response to the situation; in contrast, Noah represents the response blessed with with

21 Davidson, From Creation to Doom, p. 52.
insight. On a literal level, however, she is quite blind to "existential" as well as to every day realities. Only when she is on the ark (and there is evidence in the text that she must be carried on; see 149-50), and the level of water is measured, does she realize that Noah has been right about the meaning of the weather and about his hearing the voice of God (197-8). But her blindness is, in a sense; the opposite of despair: rather than being the inability to hope for salvation from the hostility around her, it is the inability to see the need for hope.

Davidson recognizes her inability to recognize the "fallen condition of man;" what I am equating with a lack of despair, and yet he still sees the play as fitting into his pattern. He emphasizes Noah's hopeful attitude (p. 52), and finds despair in the attitude of the nation which is destroyed: "These men ... for their inability to live lives based on hope ..." will be destroyed by the flood (p. 48). Again, if a dialectic between hope and despair is present, it is implicit. Neither Noah nor God, when they summarize the reasons that the world is to be destroyed, mentions the idea of despair; they mention only sin, ire, and disobedience (see opening of Plays VIII and IX).

Blindness is the quality of Pharaoh which strikes me. Davidson juxtaposes Pharaoh's "disobedience" to Moses' ability to have "religious and spiritual hope," and thereby continues to argue for the

\[22\] Davidson, From Creation to Doom, p. 51.

\[23\] See citation, p. 48 above.

\[24\] Davidson, p. 58.

\[25\] Davidson, p. 57.
pattern of hope vs. despair. But rather than describing the central issue in this final Old Testament episode as hope vs. despair, I would describe it, again, as the question of the difference between a proper and a perverted response to the creator; as between hope and the inability to discern the need to hope. For in the face of overwhelming evidence that the God of the Hebrews is a power mightier than any power invoked by his magicians, Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the spokesman of this God. Hope, faith, and obedience are logical responses to one's role as creature; envy, pride, blindness to wickedness and goodness, undue bragging, and disobedience to God, all of the traits which Davidson has named of the characters who do evil, are not so much signs of despair as they are signs of a perverted response to the basic fact of existence, the fact that a human being is the creature of the unmade maker. This perverted response eventually ends in despair (Adam and Eve, Cain, Lucifer) or death (Pharaoh and the Egyptians), and/or exile (Lucifer, Adam and Eve, Cain).

We move now from a consideration of the general pattern which governs the York Old Testament episodes to a consideration of some of the specific details which relate to the dialectic between right and wrong attitudes toward creaturality. Another symptom of sinfulness is a mood of chaos: the world of the disobedient, both in Old and New Testament episodes, is marked by a disarray which is "visually, verbally, and metrically emphasized."26 In the first play of the York cycle, noise and brawling mark the world of hell. Woolf points out that even the verse is

26 Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, p. 112.
shattered at the point when Lucifer falls. In hell, Lucifer is abused by the other devils both physically and verbally. The world of those who fail to recognize or who reject their proper rank is chaotic. As we see in the exchanges between Lucifer and the devils, between Cain and Abel, Cain and Brewbarret, Cain and the Angel of God, a tendency to verbal abuse marks the world of sin. Among the torturers at the Crucifixion, we find the tendency to disordered speech.

Besides chattering, anger, and swearing, another motif which denotes the chaotic society of those who reject God is the theme of disorder in socially-hierarchical relationships. In Chapter I, we noted the tendency to act inappropriately according to rank among the sinners, specifically in Adam's willingness to follow the advice of Eve, and in her willingness to take advice from a snake. Both of these events are occasions of sin. Perversions of hierarchy are also among the results of sinfulness. For example, at the end of the play of the Fall of Man, Adam complains that nature has grown hostile to him (VIII, 116). In Eden, Adam was given dominion over all of nature (III, 21-36); this natural hierarchy is disturbed when the man and woman commit their breach of hierarchy. In Play I, Lucifer acts in a way which violates the true order when he neglects to worship his creator; the result is further disarray in rank: although in heaven Lucifer is the being "nexte" after God (I, 33), in hell he is abused physically and verbally by his subordinates.

In other episodes, inversions of social and spiritual hierarchy continue both to constitute sin and to be a consequence of sinful actions.

27 Woolf, p. 111. See Play I, 113-120.
28 See Chapter I, above.
or attitudes. One example of this principle is found in the motif of disarray in the master-servant relationship. Not much of the exchange between Cain and his servant survives, but from the brief passage which we have, we can see that the servant is not as anxious to please his master as he might at first seem. When we first meet Brewbarret he says:

Lo, maister Cayme, what shaves brynge I,
Evyn of the best for to bere seyd,
And to the feyldes I wyll me hys
To fetch you moo, if ye haue neyd.

(VII, 73-6)

Brewbarret's attitude seems exemplary. But as soon as Cain replies, a new wrinkle in the relationship appears.

Cayme    Come vp, sir knave, the devyll the speyd,
         Ye will not come but ye be-prayd.

Brewbarret 0, maister Caym, I haue broken my to!
Cayme    Come vp syr, for by my thryst,
         Ye shall drynke or ye goo.

(77-81)

Both Brewbarret's unlikely excuse and Cain's curses imply that the servant does not always obey with alacrity; if the manuscript was complete, we might see that the couple has trouble getting any work finished. In neither direction, after all, does the master-servant relationship seem ideal.

In the Abraham and Isaac episode, on the other hand, the masters treat the servants with respect, and the servants are obedient and quick to comply with their masters' wishes. The servants pledge obedience (eg., X, 113-4), and although they speculate about the purpose for the journey which they are asked to make (115-124), they do not hesitate to follow Abraham's orders; eventually, they decide that to question the
meaning of the trip is not their business (124). On overhearing their speculation, Abraham chooses to satisfy his servants' curiosity by assuring them that God has commanded the journey. This is enough authority for them: the first servant pledges his trust in God (129-30); the second servant blesses his masters (135-6).

Regarding the Cain-Brewbarret type of relationship, S. Kahrl has this to say:

Just as the ordered arches of a Gothic cathedral serve as a model for God's divinely planned, hierarchical universe, so these squabbling masters and servants must represent that world turned 'upside down' by man's willful selfishness and disregard for the divine plan.29

Disorder is invited by, and at the same time is a sign of, creaturely disregard for the creator.

But in York, Old Testament morality is not so simple that it can be described in terms of a dictum such as "it is right to obey the one above you in rank." For if a servant's disobedience may be the sign of a perverted response to hierarchy, a servant's obedience may also be the sign of the same perversion. Kolve writes that the wicked are willing to be led, but that they do not necessarily understand the nature of the orders which they obey.30 The Counsellors of Pharaoh follow their leader and do not display any attitude of disobedience, but by this very willingness to serve him they indicate their perverted response to ultimate reality. They play of Moses and Pharaoh makes this point explicit by paralleling the Counsellor-Pharaoh relationship to the Moses-


30Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 222.
God relationship.

When we first meet Moses, he reveals and pledges his willingness to serve and trust in God (XI, 85-95). Likewise, the followers of Pharaoh sound their pledges. They address Pharaoh as "lorde" (21, 29, 63, 79, etc.); they, like Moses, vow to follow their leader's commands and serve him loyally (21-24; 83-84). When the final episode in the story begins, that of the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and his people express their trust in God:

**Moses**  
Beis noght aferde, God is youre frende,  
For alle cure fooses he will vs fende.  
\(\text{Pharaf} \) rones, furthe with me,  
Haves done and drede yow noght.

**II Puer**  
My lorde, loved motte pous bee,  
\(\text{dat us fro bale has brought}.\)

(367-72)

and

**Moses**  
... Therfore have ze no drede,  
But faynde ay God to plese.

**I Puer**  
\(\text{dat lorde to lande vs lede},\)  
Now wende we all at esse.

(381-84)

The Hebrews follow Moses to safety and freedom.

Immediately after the crossing of the Hebrews, the Egyptians prepare to follow, and they likewise indicate their trust in their leader, that is, in Pharaoh:

**II Egyptian**  
My lorde we are full blithe  
At youre biddying to be.

**II Consolatior**  
Lorde, to youre biddying we er boune  
Owre bodies baldely for to bede,  
We sall noght byde, but dyng \(\text{pam doune}\)  
Tylle all be dede, withouten drede.

(395-400)
The Egyptians follow Pharaoh to their deaths. Their mistake is clear. Moses, in his first speech, mentions the eternal and creative nature of God as well as his own deliverance from childhood death as his reasons for believing in the power of God (85-95); when the Egyptians put their trust in Pharaoh, when they follow him into the sea, they do so after having just been sent ten plagues by the God of their enemies. Their response to the God whose creative power is revealed via miracles, is illogical: they choose to ignore him. 31

Pharaoh, with his boasting (eg., 1-20), his stubborn will, his resolve to overcome God's people, his blindness to the power of his adversary, and his obvious impotence, represents the first of the Yorke cycle's boastful tyrants. Since I have decided to concentrate on the negative response to hierarchy, the response of the wrong-doers, I shall move past the next four plays, Annunciation to Shepherds, and on to the character of the Herod of Plays XVI and XIX, the first of the New Testament tyrants. From the moment he speaks, in the opening of Play XVI, Herod is automatically in that basic context which displays his confusion, his wrong response to his unavoidable role as creature, what I have been calling illogical behaviour. His first words reveal the first symptom of this perversion, and then each of the following scenes in which Herod appears reveals further symptoms of his perverted response to his creaturely essence. He manifests his basic mistake in traits such as bragging, vanity, jealousy, and ineffectuality.

---

31When one inverts the chain of being, it appears that Satan is the zenith, followed by devils, then the enemies of God who have worldly power, etc. The subjects of Pharaoh are obedient to their rank in the Kingdom of God's adversaries.
The Herod of Play XVI and the Herod of XIX would have been played by two different actors; their styles of speech are somewhat different; they differ in details such as initial reactions to their messengers (XVI, 129-133 vs. XIX, 75). But the two figures do share the qualities and traits mentioned above, the symptoms of a rejection of the creator. The two represent the same historical figure (Herod the Great, King of the Jews, 37-4 B.C.): Play XIX refers back to the visit of the Magi in XVI. While I am not arguing that the episodes have been revised to form a psychologically consistent characterization of Herod, I refer to these two as to a single character; the episodes are thematically if not psychologically consistent: the bragging, vanity, jealousy, and incompetence are symptoms of Herod's sinfulness, his role as an enemy of God.

In the opening speech of Play XVI, Herod echoes the creator. Play I and XVI are not close together; a medieval or modern viewer of the latter might not have seen the former, or might not remember it in detail. However, the pertinent aspects of creation and first fall need not be repeated in order to invite comparison; they are part of standard information. Herod's delusions of grandeur indicate his misapprehension of the fact of creation or his rejection of the creator. He may be judged both by comparison with details within the episode and by comparison to details of the broader context of cycle and Christian history. He says:

The clowdes clapped in clerence hat per cleraatis inclosis-
Jubiter and Jouis, Martis and Mercurij emyde-
Raykand ouere my rialté on rawe me rejoyces,
Blonderande per blastis to blaw when I bidde.
Saturne my subjett, pat sotilly is hidde,
Listes at my liking and lalies hym full lowe.
The rakke of þe rede skyes full rapplely I rike,
Thondres full thrallye by thousands I thrawe
When me likis.
Venus his voice to me awe,
Dat princes to play in hym pikis.

þe prince of planetis þat proudlyly is pight
Sall brace furth his bemes þat our belde blithes,
þe none at my myght he mosteres his myght,
And kayssaries in castellis grete kyndynes me kythes.

(1-15)

His boasting that the planets obey him seems particularly absurd when,
early in the play (62-5) the audience is reminded that a star actually
does appear - not at the command of the bombastic worldly leader, but for
God who comes as an infant. In the broader context, Herod's empty claims
that he rules the planets reveal his impotence in comparison to the power
of God, whose voice called those bodies into being from chaos in Play I.

Even the non-sequitur in lines fourteen to fifteen reflects Herod's
confusion: he shifts abruptly from a lengthy description of the power he
has over planets to a description of the fealty of his lords without
acknowledging any need for transition between the categories; he seems to
recognize no difference between celestial bodies and human beings. His
subjects might obey him, but the planets do not, and his claim that he
has jurisdiction over the latter is absurd in its illogicality and
ineffectuality.

In Play XVI, Herod tries to trick the Magi into giving him
information about the whereabouts of the child. In XIX, Herod has all
Jewish boys under two years of age slaughtered. He sets himself up as an
antagonist to Christ. Along with all the enemies of God, Herod is
ultimately impotent. In The Great Code, Frye describes the Bible as
contained within a U-shaped pattern, the standard shape of comedy.
Between Genesis and Judgment, "the story of Israel is told as a series of declines into the power of heathen kingdoms ..." "There is also a demonic cycle caused ... by the fate deliberately generated out of the pride and folly of ambitious conquerors." Inverted, the sequence of U's which represents the story of Israel charts the sequence of the rises and falls of heathen kingdoms.32 In the York Play we find repeatedly the pattern of God vs. His enemy or the enemy of His people; those who by "pride and folly" refuse to acknowledge the hierarchy which emanates from the everlasting creator are marked as losers in their battle from the beginning. Often the enemies, for a time, have power over God's chosen — Cain kills Abel, Pharaoh rules the Hebrews, Herod slaughters innocent Jewish boys, Pilate's soldiers nail Christ to a tree — however, the story of Creation, Resurrection, and Judgment remains the constant backdrop against which the episodes are played. Cain, Pharaoh, and Herod are defeated before they even begin.

Thus, the ungodly bully is an ultimately impotent figure no matter what he may accomplish. Herod causes the deaths of innocent children; he is terrible. But he is also partly buffoon by virtue of the fact that his opponent is undefeatable, and by his blindness to this basic truth. Staines suggests that farcical elements of the York Herod indicate the playwrights' propensity to give into audience demand for farce.33 Brewer writes this of the Herod of Play XXXI:


33See Chapter I, p. 22. In his analysis, Staines emphasizes the impotence of Herod, but does not make explicit the connection between farce and the absurdity of rejection of God.
Herod ... with his hyperbolic, sometimes non-sensical diction ... and obliviousness to matters that directly affect him ... is simply characterized, or rather caricatured, as a buffoon for a dramatic contrast to the mute, stoic Christ of pageant XXX.34

While these observations are doubtlessly accurate, one might also emphasize that the buffoonery of Herod functions as a sign of his ultimate defeat; his incompetence in his own kingdom signals his inability to succeed in a struggle against an omnipotent power.

The juxtaposition of Herod's vanity and jealousy indicate his weakness. In Play XVI, we meet him for the first time, most likely adorned in fine robes as he boasts of his beauty and power. His reaction to the announcement which the three kings bring, that they seek a baby who is to be king of the Jews, does not match his original pride and confidence (173-180). In Play XIX, the contrast between Herod's vanity and his jealousy is more subdued than in Play XVI. His opening boasts are not so outrageous in detail, nor so bombastic in style, although they are still highly unrealistic (18-22). His reaction to the messenger's announcement that "pale sale he schulte be kyng / And weldé all erthely thynge" (112-13) still contrasts with the original boasts. He replies: "Allas pan am I lorne. / Fy on thaym, faytours, fy!" (114-16).

Throughout his appearances, Herod displays his impotence by his inability to produce obedience among his subjects. In the exchange between Herod and his messenger in Play XVI, we witness the emptiness of his assertions of authority:

Muncius    My lorde ser Herowe, kyng with crowne!
Herodes     Pees dastarde, in pe deueles dispite.
Muncius    My lorde, now note is nere pis towne.

Herod's response to his messenger, quoted above, is to tell him to be quiet. Obviously, this does not intimidate the messenger, who goes on to deliver his announcement. Herod takes exception to this disobedience and threatens violence until one of his soldiers gives the king the common sense advice that Herod might benefit from listening to his messenger's words. This passage contains several of the types of exchanges which characterize the Herod-episodes: the continual prompting of the king by soldiers and counsellors, his testy treatment of his messenger, which seems to be ignored (eg. XIX, 106, 119, 125-30); the obsequious compliments which his servants pay him; and his threats of violence which are never carried out.

Play XIX begins with Herod's long bid for silence and respect. Again, we hear his ineffectuality echoing through everything he says: the fact that he needs to begin with prolonged pleas for silence indicates that his presence does not command respect. The chaos and noise associated with Herod's court are signs of the hierarchical disarray which his sinfulness invites.

We have seen in the passage quoted above that one method Herod uses to command obedience is to threaten violence. In XIX, the first counselor assures Herod that anyone who does not pay attention to the

35Eg. XVI, 143, 193-99, 237-44; XIX, 139-43, 147-59, 181-86. Much of this is simply the advice a counselor owes to his ruler; sometimes, however, it is so common sensical that Herod appears quite stupid.
king will be punished: "We shulde sone wirke non woo" (31). But when they find out that the Magi have not obeyed the king, that they have left the country without fulfilling their promise to return to Herod with news of the child, there is nothing that Herod or his servants can do. Herod's way to solve the problem is to call the messenger who brings this news a liar and threaten to hang him (119-130). The threat, of course, is never carried out. These details add to the portrait of the tyrant whose commands are ineffectual and whose threats are empty.

In both plays we have examples of Herod's powerlessness against God's will. His effort to learn the whereabouts of the child is foiled because God sends to the Magi a dream which warns them not to return to Herod (369-80). In Play XVIII, God uses the same strategy in order to prevent Jesus from being slaughtered in the purge which will be ordered by Herod in Play XIX.

Although the other Herod of the York-cycle (Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, 4 B.C. - 39 A.D.; see Beadle glossary) has a somewhat different character, Play XXXI effectively develops one of the motifs which we have been considering in connection with the first Herod: that of the emptiness and ineffectuality of a tyrant's words. Jesus is, of course, one manifestation of the Word of God; the fact that his silence defeats the second Herod's purpose is ironic. Herod's court is noisy; Play XXXI begins with his long plea for "pees". Throughout the cycle, Christ's controlled rhetorical style contrasts with the verbal chaos associated with the sinners; it is simple, direct, and dignified.36

36 Cf. Collier, Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus; Christi Play, p. 70. "Christ's speech represents the plain expository style ... clear, precise, varied ..."
Richard Beadle gives a good description of how this contrast is developed in Play XXXI, the scene of Christ Before Herod, and of how the juxtaposition of styles is used thematically:

... Herod, with the potential of the alliterative line at his disposal, swears, threatens, and eventually shouts his way through the entire episode. The chief effect of the traditional bluster, however, lies not in the simple virtuosity of its vocabulary, even when that makes sorties into 'court French', but in its contrast with the potent silence of its victim.37

Herod's main concern seems to be to have as much fun as possible with the prisoner. After some hesitation about whether or not to hold court (101-102), Herod is convinced to see the prisoner by the mention of the "mekill maystrie" which he has performed (108; i.e., high-handed deeds). The king is even more eager when he hears that it is the famous "Criste" who is being brought. He says:

O, pis is pe ilke selue and pe same -
Nowe sirs, ye be welcome ywiswye.

And in faith I am fayne he is fonne,
His fares to frayne and to fele:
Nowe pes games was grathely begonne.

(115-119)

From this point on, the court concentrates not on the legal matter, the task of deciding whether or not Christ is guilty of some crime, but rather on the "game" (165), the project of getting Christ to acknowledge Herod either by gesture or by word. Herod speaks to him in French (145); the dukes attempt to convince Christ to kneel before the king (177); they conjecture that the silent prisoner is ignorant of court etiquette (184), or that he is mute (190). Although Herod cannot understand why the

Jewish leaders want to punish Christ for his "deeds of the devil" (226) or for his claim to be king (227-234), he is still determined to have some fun with the prisoner; he is still determined to have "gaudis full goode and games" (237). Herod shouts at Christ: "Vta! Oy! Oy!" (241), bribes him (247), then, when Herod is told that his voice probably scares the prisoner (251-52), he adopts a gentler tone. He tries Latin (261-4), asks Christ if he wants to whisper in his ear (286), and finally becomes frustrated. Herod's sons take turns coaxing, threatening, and shouting before the decision is made to dress the prisoner in a white robe and finally to send him back to Pilate without charges being laid. The soldiers bring the significance of the scene into focus; while robing Christ they say:

I Miles  Nay, we gete nozt a worde wele Y warand.  
II Miles  Man, mustir some meruaille to me.  
I Dux  What, wene ze he be wiser than we?  

(362-4)

Christ, by his silence, proves not only to be wiser than the empty-headed buffoon and the members of his court, but also to be more dignified; he dominates the scene by his very silence. 38 The episode reveals the impotence of the second Herod, who fails to recognize the seriousness of the situation and the goodness of his prisoner. The scene also juxtaposes the lack of power of the secular hierarchy to the dignified wisdom of Christ.

The verbal ineffectuality of the second Herod and his court is one sign of the ultimate impotence of all who fail to accept the authority of the creator, or, as I shall explore further in Chapter III, who fail to

38Beadle and King, York Mystery Plays, p. 175.
recognize the authority of His son. Lucifer's first breach of authority 
was marked by the noisy confusion, the vanity, the blindness, and the 
impotence which the portraits of Herod display. Herod of Play XVI 
parodies the creator by claiming to have power over the planets. He also 
 imitates the Lucifer of the first episode, not only by manifesting 
blindness, vanity, and impotence, but also by using an inappropriately 
high style for self-declaration. This usurpation of style which Herod 
commits in Play XVI is another symptom of his illogical reaction to his 
inevitable role as creature.

In his opening speech in Play XVI, Herod adopts, for a speech about 
himself, a style which lends itself better to the purpose of praise.

Auerbach's descriptions of the various uses in the Middle Ages for each 
of the three levels of rhetorical prose might give us a clue to the 
nature of Herod's mistake. Augustine had set out the rules for Christian 
discourse: all three levels were appropriate for religious themes, but 
each had its particular purpose. The low style, marked by simplicity of 
construction, was to be used for instruction and exegesis; the 
intermediate style, distinctive for parallel constructions and other— 
rhetorical devices, was appropriate for praise; the sublime style, which 
may or may not be ornamented, but always has an "impassioned tone," was 
to be used for the purpose of moving the audience. In the cycle, verse 

39 Collier traces verbal styles which "control the York plays" (p. 
97) in Ch. II-IV of Poetry and Drama. He does not mention the usurpation 
of style by Herod in Play XVI, but does deal with the other two Herod 
plays in their "stylistic repetitions of the dimensions of Lucifer's 
fall" (98).

40 Erich Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin 
Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, tr. R. Manheim (New York: Pantheon 
is the medium used to imitate ordinary speech, so in the following
analysis I make the assumption that similar attitudes toward levels of
style might have pertained to the speeches of Herod and the Magi; even
though these are composed in verse.

Herod's opening style is best described as either middle or sublime
style; one could see the first scene of Play XVI as being in mock-middle
or mock-sublime style.\footnote{Cf. Collier, Poetry and Drama, p. 59; "the pseudo-high style of
the speeches given to the enemies of Christ becomes virtually
indistinguishable from the lowest of the styles ..."}

In his first few sentences, he seems to be making an attempt to use parallel construction in his description of the
planets. The rest of this scene, in which soldiers praise Herod and
Herod continues to brag and threaten, uses the same pattern of long lines
(ten to fifteen syllables for most lines, or five to seven feet), and the
same type of alliteration (the repetition of a single consonant several
times) with which Herod begins. The long line-length, the multi-
repetition of the same consonant, and the attempt at parallel,
construction contrast with the shorter lines (usually four feet) and more
balanced alliteration (two consonants each repeated twice in each line)
which mark the versification used by the Magi in the next scene.\footnote{Line length being aurally recognizable by alliteration pattern.}
The opening scene has an air of chaos about it; the Magi's scene seems more
subdued and controlled. But the juxtaposition of styles does more than
just create two moods; it also marks Herod as a blasphemer, a usurper.
When the Magi finally discover the spot to which the star has led them,
when they see the child, they break into a series of hail-lyrics; they
utilize the long line and single-consonant-repetition which is the style
of Herod's opening self-praise. The Magi are still more controlled: the 
line length does not alter between very short and very long as it does 
when used by Herod; nor are there many lines in which the number of 
syllables exceeds ten. The pertinent difference between the scene at the 
manger and the opening scene is the fact that the Magi use the "middle" 
style only once they come face to face with the son of God, whom they 
have recognized as the "one that should be lorde" (64). Herod, on the 
other hand, uses the style of praise in order to speak about himself.

If Play I is fresh in memory, it provides a touchstone against which 
to measure the character of Herod. Before He created the angels, God 
declared His self-worth in a style comparable in line-length and in 
alliteration to the style used by Herod in XVI and by the Magi in their 
adoration of Christ. The good angels copy the style for the purpose of 
praising their maker; they, in a sense, imitate God: they talk about Him 
in the style He has used to talk about Himself. Lucifer, on the other 
hand, adopts the style in order to talk about himself: he parodies God 
(i.e., imitation in bono vs. imitation in malo).

In using this terminology, imitation and parody, to describe the 
action of Play I, I diverge from Gardner's reading of the scene. In 
"Decorum and the Fall of the Angels" he writes that "Lucifer in the 
Wakefield Creation (and only in this cycle) is dramatically parodic of 
God."43 He sees the Chester, Hegge, and York opening speeches of Deus as 
each displaying a breach of decorum:

---

In the Chester and Hegge plays, God does not simply state facts about himself, but rather indecorously talks of his virtues. The same happens, to a lesser extent, in the York play.\textsuperscript{44}

He points out that in the Wakefield Creation "God introduces himself in flat statements of fact" so that the "first direct praise of God comes not from God Himself but in the song of the cherubim"\textsuperscript{45} and that in this song the praise closely parallels the praise given to God in the angels' song in York. He finds that:

... by giving the traditional boastful speeches of Deus to Lucifer, from whom boasting is to be expected since he is the original type of pride, and by removing these speeches from his characterization of Deus, the playwright has already implied the fall ...\textsuperscript{46}

While I agree with Gardner that the Wakefield Lucifer parodies God by using "language more appropriate to God's legitimate claims,"\textsuperscript{47} I cannot agree with his ideas about bragging and decorum, or with his claim that only in Wakefield does Lucifer parody God and set up a model which Pharaoh, Herod, and Pilate follow. To say that God "brags" in his opening speech is to ignore the connotation of exaggeration which often goes along with the term. It is possible that Gardner does not use the word "brag" to imply exaggeration, but there is still a problem with his idea that the claims made by God constitute a breach of decorum. The fact that God makes these speeches about Himself without penalty, but that Lucifer makes the same sort of speeches and is therefore exiled to hell, is important. The style and moment which are appropriate for self-

\textsuperscript{44}Gardner, \textit{The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle}, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{45}Gardner, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{46}Gardner, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{47}Gardner, p. 18.
declarations by the creator are inappropriate for self-declarations by one of His creatures. Lucifer, fashioned for the purpose of praising God, (I, 23-4) parodies God by choosing instead to talk about himself. Thus, when Herod (XVI), Pharaoh (XI), and Pilate (XXVI, XXX) begin speeches with blustering self-praise, they follow the proud and ungodly example of the bad angel. The motif becomes especially noticeable in Play XVI because Herod's usurpation of an inappropriately high style for self-declaration is juxtaposed to the more proper use of levels of style by the Magi as they converse and then praise Christ.

Many of the same details which characterize the York Play's Herod also apply to the characterization of Pilate: he is vain, boasting; his court is chaotic. In terms of techniques of characterization, Pilate may well be the most controversial of all the York cast. For over twenty years critics have debated the question of what constitutes the key to the ambivalence which Pilate shows toward Christ; the problem of whether the playwrights were caught between good and bad Pilate-traditions, or whether Pilate hesitates to condemn Christ only because of Proculla's dream, or whether some trait such as love of power can be used to explain each one of Pilate's deviations. In The Conspiracy, Pilate argues against Annas and Caiaphas; he does not seem willing to prosecute Jesus. In The Dream of Pilate's Wife, Pilate is warned by Satan via his wife that if Jesus is condemned, the couple will lose all their wealth and comfort; Pilate ends up sending Christ to Herod. In Christ Before Pilate II, Pilate seems reticent to condemn Jesus, then he suddenly decides to let Christ be put to death.
Arnold Williams calls the Wakefield Pilate a great achievement because he is thoroughly bad and thus is the centre for one side of the struggle between good and evil. Kolve disagrees, arguing that the York Pilate, because he is a realistic measure of good and bad, is a more interesting character. In 1970, Martin Stevens reviews this disagreement, commenting on the fact that Kolve, in this assessment, seems to be guilty of judging the play from fin-de-siecle dramatic canons, and then concluding:

Pilate in the York cycle, who is made out by Kolve to be a complex character because he wavers in passing judgment on Jesus, is in reality a straightforward villain ... His waverings add sport to the trial scenes as Jesus is shunted back and forth between indecisive judges who take greater interest in the technicalities of Law than the issue of Justice ... [Pilate] wavers not because he is conscience-ridden but only because he fears God's vengeance ... All this action prolongs the horror of the trial and provides an effective pattern of repeated scenes that the audience is led to anticipate, thus investing the whole of the Passion sequence with dramatic irony.

After Stevens' article, the tendency is to see Pilate as all-bad, but the search for the single principle which explains his waverings goes on. I shall review two analyses of the York Pilate characterization and suggest that since each assumes that the playwrights were aiming at psychological consistency, each overlooks the possibility that the reason for Pilate's hesitations is thematic.

In his 1972 "The Characterization of Pilate in the York Cycle Play," Robert Brawer concerns himself with reconciling "all these signs of


49Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 233.

Pilate's character. He expands on a point which we see in Stevens' assessment of the way in which Jesus is passed back and forth between the judges. But Brawer stresses the fact that Pilate is totally evil, that he only hesitates to condemn Christ to death because he wants to display his power by frustrating the aims of the Jewish officials. As soon as Christ displays the real power in the scene of the bowing of the banners, Pilate is afraid enough for his own power to order the scourging. Thus his whole character turns on his respect for power.

S. Mussetetter develops another of Stevens' points; she argues for a totally evil Pilate from another angle. She agrees that the dream of Pilate's wife is the reason for Pilate's hesitation to condemn Christ. But we know that Pilate is purely evil because in the first scene in which we meet him he is characterized in terms of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Both arguments provide insights into Pilate-characterization. However, these searches for the single key to Pilate's fluctuations, the single principle intended by the playwright as motivation for Pilate's hesitations, betray a questionable assumption regarding methods of dramatic characterization. If the hesitations of Pilate are grounded in

---

52 Brawer, p. 297.
53 Brawer, p. 299.
theme rather than in psychology, then the search for a consistent villain
is perhaps in vain.\textsuperscript{55}

Mussetter, who argues for a consistently evil and hypocritical
Pilate within Play XXX, is not concerned with defending consistency of
characterization for all the episodes in which Pilate appears, as Brawer
is. The list of problems with the argument for a Pilate who is
psychologically consistent across episodes includes the fact of multiple
actors and the suggestion that methods of staging did not allow that
every play be seen every year.\textsuperscript{56} One problem with defending the idea of
a realistic Pilate, even within, for example, Play XXX alone, will not be
solved by discoveries concerning staging techniques. Both Mussetter in
respect to Play XXX and Brawer in respect to all Pilate-episodes, assume
that a consistent character was the aim of the playwrights and revisers
of these scenes. Although Brawer concludes that "Thus characterization
is not arbitrary; nor can one method of characterization be assumed to be
intrinsically better than another," he only refers to either a
consistently evil stereotype or "the creation of morally complex
characters."\textsuperscript{57} In other words, he does not consider the possibility that
an inconsistent Pilate, a Pilate whose psychology is less important than

\textsuperscript{55}For arguments similar to mine regarding Chaucer and Shakespeare,
i.e., that the key to a certain characterization may be thematic rather
than psychological, see R. Mizener, "Character and Action in the Case of
Criseyde," \textit{PMLA} 54 (1939); E. E. Stoll, \textit{Art and Artifice in Shakespeare}
(Barnes and Noble, 1963), vi.

\textsuperscript{56}For a tentative solution to the problem of cycle-length, i.e.,
that only thirty-two pageants were performed each year, see Alexandra F.
Johnston and Margaret Dorrell, \textit{Leeds Studies in English, New Series, V}

\textsuperscript{57}Brawer, "The Characterization of Pilate in the York Cycle Plays,"
p. 303.
the thematic function of his action, may be dramatically effective. Brawer wants to demonstrate this: "external stage conditions notwithstanding, that the playwright may well have conceived his character with sufficient complexity to resolve such inconsistencies as one finds at first glance." 58 Likewise, Mussetter's point is that Pilate "emerges as a psychologically complex portrait of evil." 59

But even if the character of Pilate in the York Play is psychologically inconsistent, even if the playwrights were not careful that every one of Pilate's decisions was the logical outcome of a certain character trait, the episodes do display thematic consistency. Some of the main themes of the Conspiracy-Passion episodes are the incompetence, the ultimate impotence, of the ungodly earthly rulers and the chaos of their world. Pilate's hesitations add to this chaotic mood; the passing back and forth of Christ makes it seem that the leaders are unable to rule effectively. 60 Although Mussetter and Brawer defend the idea of a consistently evil Pilate, both point out the way in which their reading of this character adds to the impotence theme. For Brawer, Pilate's love of power reflects the struggle among the secular rulers; Pilate is an evil character who epitomizes "the falsity and folly of the earthly


60 Cf. M. Stevens as cited above. He emphasizes the dramatic and thematic function of the trial scenes.
monarchy opposed to the divine kingdom..." Mussetter concludes this about Pilate and "his hypocritical beadle":

Their analogous efforts to deny their demonic natures allow the playwright to explore the psychological futility of self-deception in men who perceive so little in the workings of things that they presume to control the course of events and reorder their sinful selves at will.62

Yet each of their arguments for a consistent villain are incomplete. Mussetter gives an excellent analysis of the playwright's method of characterizing Pilate as evil by using short vignettes which open Play XXX and associate him with all of the Seven Deadly Sins. However, her argument that the key to his hesitation to condemn Christ in Play XXX depends only on the dream which Satan sends to his wife does not take into account the fact that the Pilate of Play XXVI also hesitates to commit himself to the plan to capture Christ (see 29-37). Mussetter isolates Play XXX completely from the rest of the portrayals of Pilate; she sees the dream as the only possible explanation for Pilate's wavering.

Brawer takes the opposite position toward the dream episode. He continues to emphasize the power struggle between Pilate and the Jewish leaders. The dream "is less important in determining the outcome of Jesus' trial before Pilate than it is in reigniting that conflict." Pilate refuses to condemn Christ because he wishes to restrain Caiaphas and Annas.63 Brawer's reading does not account for the fact that Pilate:


62Mussetter, "The York Pilate and the Seven Deadly Sins," p. 64.

63Brawer, p. 293.
chooses to send Christ to Herod and thereby risks the possibility that Annas and Caiaphas will achieve their end through Herod’s authority; if Herod condemns Christ, Pilate fails to frustrate the Jewish leaders and he allows another leader to exercise power. But Brawer insists that love of power is Pilate’s prime motivation throughout the trial scenes.

Neither points out that the dream continues the theme of the impotence of the ungodly leaders. This dream echoes those sent by God to the Magi and to Joseph. In both cases, God achieves his purpose. Satan, because he has realized the implications of the crucifixion, wants to make sure that Christ remains alive. He fails, as of course he must, since his adversary is God.

This chapter, then, has been a reading of several of the episodes containing evil characters from the point of view of how patterns of characterization, mood, theme, and style reflect the hierarchical assumptions which are grounded in a belief in an omnipotent, everlasting creator. The Old Testament episodes are best described in terms of a dialectic between proper and improper responses to the inevitable role of the creature. Inversions of social hierarchy constitute and at the same time are a consequence of the wrong response. But Old Testament morality is more complicated than the motif of the recalcitrant servant might suggest; some characters display a perverted response to God by failing to recognize the limitations of their earthly master. Pharaoh, Herod, and Pilate are three examples of earthly tyrants who set themselves up as adversaries to God. The mood of Herod’s court, his vanity, jealousy, and blindness, and even his choice of rhetorical style betray his role as an impotent enemy of goodness. In the Conspiracy-Crucifixion-Resurrection
sequence, Pilate's wavering does not necessarily reflect complexity of characterization, but it does add to the chaos and ineffectuality which are part of the 'upsidown' worlds of those who respond improperly to their unavoidable role as creature.
THE ULTIMATE VIRTUE: THE SHIFT TO NEW TESTAMENT MORALITY

According to my reading of the York Play, the vertical context evoked by the opening episodes, that is, the hierarchical relationship among God - angel - man - woman - beast - inanimate object - devil - Lucifer, governs the entire cycle. In terms of individual plot, this means that a human being who fails to serve the creator is frustrated or defeated. In terms of characterization, it means that human beings who fail to act according to their inevitable rank as creature display one or more of a constellation of significant traits including blindness, pride, vanity, jealousy, and incompetence. Finally, in terms of mood, it means that the disobedient human being is often surrounded by the chaos which signals his rejection of the creator and which is the antithesis of paradisal order. The ultimate vice is rejection of or indifference to the creator and is expressed in any one of the above ways. Conversely, the ultimate virtue is acceptance of hierarchy: obedience to explicit commands, such as the one God gives to Adam and Eve, or to implicit "commands", such as the unspoken moral imperative that Lucifer praise God and not himself. These principles apply throughout the York cycle.

Despite the shift from Old to New Testament morality, obedience is never superseded in its role as the basis of goodness; the dialectic between the two types of response to the divine hierarchy continues until the final scene of the Play.

While this vertical principle provides a constant context for the whole cycle, the cycle’s horizontal context, the plot of the cycle,
progresses. Throughout the Old Testament episodes, God's creatures produce a lengthy record of improper responses to the creator and a somewhat shorter record of proper responses. Then absolute stasis interacts with finite flux: the infinite enters time; God becomes man. The creator thus provides an entirely new opportunity for His creatures to respond to Him. In the York Play, this temporary descent of the divine into the human, however much it complicates the problem of recognizing goodness and divinity, does not destroy the original vertical context of the cycle; rather, it adds a new imperative to the list of implicit and explicit rules, that is, it adds the requirement to recognize Christ's goodness and divinity. The virtue of obedience is not displaced so much as altered to include this new fact of incarnation.

In light of Kolve's 1966 work and Ashley's 1973 analysis of the Towneley Cycle, however, one might be led to read the New Testament episodes of the York Play, and of all the cycles, as if the theme of obedience fades from prominence. Kolve describes the shift from the old to the new covenants as a point in the cycles at which new themes come into focus. He writes this concerning the quality shared by "God's chosen":

That quality is obedience, and until Christ's ministry, human goodness is made known chiefly in its simple terms ... This necessity to obey continued into New Testament times. Mary accepted the message of the angel with the words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," and Christ in Gethsemane affirmed that not His natural will, but the Father's, would be done. At Christ's incarnation, however, new patterns of goodness were established, for Christ was understood by St. Paul, and by the Fathers after him, to be the first "spiritual" man ... One of the services of the Corpus Christi play was to present that new pattern of goodness in dramatic terms.

And later:
The ultimate virtue of the good is obedience, and later, charity.

Ashley writes this about the shift from the pre-Christian era:

In the Old Testament plays, the theme of obedience to God's order motivates most dramatic action; the New Testament plays focus on the issue of faith. 2

But the shift from Old to New Testament is not a movement away from an emphasis on obedience. In York, faith and charity do not so much replace obedience in the New Testament episodes as they do complete the list of imperatives. This is not to say that the virtue of charity is not emphasized at the judgment. At one point Deus (Christ) says to the good souls: "Whenne I was hungrye ze me fedde, / To slake my thriste youre harte was freee" (285-6), and later to the bad souls:

Caistiffis, als ofte als it betidde
pat nedfull aught askid in my name,
ze herde þem noght ...

(357-9)

Kolve cites as evidence for his claim that charity rather than obedience becomes the ultimate virtue of the New Testament times the fact that in York Christ separates the good souls from the bad on the basis of the acts of corporal mercy. He writes:

In the York Judgment, God the Father begins with a long recapitulation of history, in which this part of Christ's mission [i.e., to be "an exemplar of goodness"] is given great importance:

Sethen in erthe þan goone he dwelle,
Ensoumpill he gauþ þame heueven to wynne,
In tempill hym-selffe to tech and tell,
To by þame blisse þat neuere my blyne.

1Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 238; p. 264.

The example of Christ's life redefines the goodness acceptable to God, and as a result we have in the plays of the Final Judgment little reference to the written law, or even to man's obedience, but instead a more searching examination of the individual souls in terms of the seven deeds of corporal mercy. 3

Yet another quotation from the York judgment shows that what underlies the requirement to be merciful, to follow Christ's example, is the requirement to be obedient to God's will.

Deus Dis day per domys bus haue I dight To ilke a man as he hath servued me.

(79-80)

God will judge all human beings according to how they served Him, that is, according to how obedient they were to His various imperatives and commandments, implicit and explicit.

One of the commandments which Christ emphasizes during his ministry is charity. 4 This, however, is not seen as a new commandment which applies primarily to post-incarnation human beings. When, in the York judgment, Christ separates the souls, he does not apply one set of criteria for the Old Testament souls (obedience) and another for the New Testament souls (charity). The two commandments of Christ — love God and neighbour — only summarize the Law given to Moses. 5 In fact, most of the York post-incarnation episodes focus not on the acts of corporal mercy but rather on another moral question — the question of recognition of Christ, of faith in his divinity.


4See Play XX, 151-168. He also emphasizes forgiveness — see Play XXIV, 90-8; XXXVI, 255-8 — as well as humility — see XXVII, 1-72.

5See Play XX, 151-168 for Jesus' explication of this point.
However, the focus of faith is not unique to the New Testament episodes in York. Certainly the fact that the divine becomes human complicates the issue of recognizing and having faith in God. In the episodes from creation to Moses, more often than not, either an angel of God or God Himself appears to deliver an order to the character who must make a decision. Even Pharaoh, who never hears the voice of God, witnesses the terrible signs He sends as proof that Moses is His messenger. Thus it may appear that the problem of recognition of and faith in God is not predominant among Old Testament themes.

I would argue, however, that the theme of faith plays an important role beginning as early as the opening episode. Lucifer fails to recognize that the perfection of his creator requires that he praise God. Eve places more faith in the promise of a snake than she places in the warning of her creator. Cain fails to recognize that the generosity of his creator requires that he offer worshipful tithing. Uxor fails to recognize the evil of the world and the goodness of her husband, or even the fact that forty days of rain signals disaster. Pharaoh is blind to the fact that the omnipotent creator opposes him. These instances of indifference and blindness to goodness, divinity, and God are problems of faith. The theme of recognition continues into New Testament time, but with a new object. Until an angel of God speaks to him, Joseph does not recognize the truth of Mary's claims that she carries God's son (Play XIII, "Joseph's Trouble about Mary"). In Play XVI, Herod is blind to the facts about his power: he believes that he himself rules the planets.

6In Exodus, God hardens Pharaoh's heart against Moses' warnings (9:12). No such reason is given for Pharaoh's stubbornness in York.
Moreover, in his jealousy of the earthly power of the child-king whom the Magi seek, Herod displays his inability to recognize goodness and divinity and is thereby contrasted to the worshipful Magi. Pilate, too, spends his time worrying over power, wealth, and reputation and he fails to appreciate the goodness and divinity of his prisoner. In post-resurrection Plays, several episodes focus on the theme of recognition of or faith in Christ. These include XXXVIII, "The Resurrection", especially at the point at which the centurion gives testimony to the divinity of Christ and is ridiculed by Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas, (85-120) and during Pilate's last speech in which he asserts confidently that no one will ever hear of this resurrection story. Plays XL, "The Supper at Emmaus"; XLI, "The Incredulity of Thomas"; and XLII, "The Ascension" (eg., 241-56) also focus on the problem of faith in Christ.

Lack of faith in or indifference to the existence and superiority of God, both creator and Christ, is rejection of or misunderstanding of divine hierarchy. Although this theme begins at the Fall of the Angels, the incarnation complicates it. When the zenith of being appears in the midst of the finite flux, in a sense, perfection is temporarily disguised. But the original hierarchy is not abolished; the requirement to serve God remains the inevitable law of creatureship; at the same time, the place in which to find Him is a surprise.

The shift into New Testament faith includes some surprising requirements for the good characters. In discussing this shift, Ashley underlines the humility of Christ and sees this humility as an indication that the original order of hierarchy is transformed into an order of humility:
The original ordering was the hierarchy established at the creation. Human sin, however, violated this ideal order. God's historical plan of redemption provided a means of regaining order, not by perfect righteousness and obedience, but through faith in God's power, now paradoxically expressed in His humility — the Incarnation.7

Later she writes:

The transition between the older order and the new one entails a certain amount of confusion, dramatically exploited in Towneley for the purpose of teaching the nature of Redemption. The extended mental handwringing of Joseph and John the Baptist, for example, is explicable only if we take seriously the audience's concern with the conflict of righteousness and grace. These two characters, who certainly have all good intentions, dramatize the difference between a hierarchical order in which the violation of degree is punished, and an order of humility in which the master is not more than the servant and forgiveness restores man's status before God.8

As I examine whether this passage might be used to describe the transition between Old and New Testament morality in York, I also question its accuracy in describing the shift in Towneley.

I dealt with my objection to the idea Ashley expresses in the first question above when I argued that obedience to the implicit "command" to serve God entails faith in Him and recognition of Christ; this faith, in turn, demands obedience to explicit commandments. Ashley, naturally, refers to the latter, to obedience to Law; in this case I may be arguing chiefly with her terminology. But the second citation points to aspects of Ashley's reading of Towneley which differ significantly from my reading of York. She describes the Old Testament episodes of Towneley in terms of the theme of obedience to "a hierarchical order in which the violation of degree is punished" and the New Testament episodes in terms of the movement away from hierarchically-defined sin to an "order of

8 Ashely, p. 27-28.
humility in which the master is not more than the servant." In another place she describes the change in this way:

The order of grace is based on humility — the low are elevated and the high deposed — upsetting a hierarchical order in which the lower obeys the higher in rank.

and later as:

... the reordering of human loyalties in the Christian era — from natural human to spiritual relationships.\textsuperscript{9}

But the hierarchical definition of sin as insubordination in human rank is, as we have seen, not the only way to describe Old Testament ethics. While breach of social hierarchy is often an occasion for or sign of a wrong attitude toward the creator, obedience to superiors may also be a sign of the same.\textsuperscript{10} At the same time, in Old Testament stories, we find examples of God-ordained inversions of rank.\textsuperscript{11} Finally, Ashley's claim that Towneley's New Testament episodes are about the reordering of loyalties from natural to spiritual is challenged by the Old Testament episode concerning Isaac and Abraham.

Neither in Towneley nor in York, then, is Old Testament morality based simply on the requirement to obey one's "natural" superior in rank. But neither does the pre-occupation with hierarchically-defined sin disappear in the New Testament episodes. As the moral requirements, implicit and explicit, shift to include emphasis on charity and faith, so the hierarchies shift to incorporate the fact of incarnation. For

\textsuperscript{9}Ashley, "The Idea of Order in the Towneley Cycle," p. 85 and 93.

\textsuperscript{10}See Chapter II, p. 54 above.

\textsuperscript{11}Ashley herself cites two in Towneley (pp. 86-87): the instances of Noah's sons correcting him and his wife and of Jacob being preferred to Esau. In the York flood see the case of the children correcting Uxor IX, 103-4 and 149-50.
example, at the Ascension, it is made clear that the apostles teach with
an authority conferred by Christ.\textsuperscript{12} At the Judgment, Christ invites the
apostles to sit beside him:

\begin{quote}
Mi postelis and my darlyngis dere,
\(\textbf{b}\)e dredfull drome \(\textbf{b}\)is day is dight.
\textit{Both heuen and erthe and hell schall here}
\textit{Howe I schall holde \(\textbf{b}\)at I haue hight:}
\textit{That ze schall sitte on seetis sere}
\textit{Beside myselffe to se \(\textbf{b}\)at sight,}
\textit{And for to deme folke ferre and nere}
\textit{Aftir \(\textbf{b}\)er werkyng, wronge or right.}
\end{quote}

(XLVII, 185-92)

Christ has established a new and powerful hierarchy. In the Pentecost
play, Peter speaks first, with obvious authority: "Brethir, takes tente
unto my steuen." In the Ascension play, again, Peter opens and closes
the action. The new hierarchy on earth, with the papacy as zenith, would
have been recognizable to the medieval audience.\textsuperscript{13}

The incarnation does not cancel the original ordering of reality
into a chain of being, but rather adds a problem of recognizing God and
his newly appointed ambassadors. This gives a twist to the theme of
faith: a new and surprising requirement of seeing absolute goodness in a
human being. But the humility of the master, emphasized by Ashley as
marking the transition into a morality of faith from a morality of
obedience, does not mean that "the master is not more than the servant,"

\textsuperscript{12}Sec XLII, 129-152.

\textsuperscript{13}In art, Peter was often portrayed with a crown, holding keys which
bind heaven and earth, apostles beside him. See Clifford Davidson and
David E. O'Connor, \textit{York Art} (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications,

\textsuperscript{14}Cited above; p. 84.
before Herod, in the crucifixion, the problem for faith is that the master, who is infinitely more than the servant, must be recognized despite his humility. The only explanation, maintains Ashley, for the mental handwringing of Joseph and John when the first is asked to see his wife as the bearer of the son of God and the second is asked to baptize his lord, is the conflict of righteousness and grace which is part of the transition between "a hierarchical order" and "an order of humility." But these themes of humility and of reluctance on the part of God's servants are not markers of a transition; they continue a motif which begins in the Old Testament episodes.

God's actions and commands are surprising because they continually overturn the apparent earthly order of might. This happens long before the humble carpenter heals the sick, teaches with authority, and rises from the dead. Humility is emphasized from the earliest episodes of the York cycle. Abel, although apparently defeated, is ultimately victorious, not in the action of the play but in the context of judgment. Noah is an old man who is surprised at being chosen for a task on which the continuance of the human race depends; even his wife has trouble believing that he has been chosen by God. When God tells Moses what he must do in order to lead his people to freedom, Moses replies, in the spirit of the humble Noah:

A, lord, syth, with thy leue,
Dat lynage loves me noght,

15Cited above; see p. 84.

16Ashley discusses the "demands for obedience to the will of God, which seem to counter a natural hierarchy" (85) as "a tension between normal human relationships" and God's will; but, again, she sees this as a marker of the "confrontation between the two order" (89-90).
From the earliest episodes, the humble are called upon to overturn the powerful. In the New Testament episodes, the tradition continues with Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the apostles. To their ungodly peers, these servants of God often seem ridiculous in their claims, but in reality, they are supported by the omnipotent creator. In Towneley, as in York, the unwillingness of John to baptize Christ continues the motif of a servant’s surprise at an unexpected commandment by God to fulfill an exalted role.\textsuperscript{17} His hesitation also emphasizes the mystery of the incarnation and the humility of Jesus. But the point of the scene is not that the master is not more than the servant, but that the master who is infinitely more makes surprising demands on his servants. The theme of humility, itself, can be traced back to the difference between a humble Abel and a disdainful Cain; back further to the worshipful Adam and Eve who are tempted to become power-hungry; then right back to the difference between the good angels, who realize their dependence on the creator, and the bad angels, who act as if they are self-sufficient.

\textsuperscript{17}In Towneley, see Noah, II, 60-4, 171-2, 248-9, 267-9. The Moses episode is identical to York’s.
CONCLUSION

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY
FOR THE CRITICISM OF CORPUS CHRISTI DRAMA

The episodes of the York cycle are published, performed, and studied together because they were discovered in a single manuscript and because there is abundant evidence for the claim that they were originally performed in sequence on a single day, to give the most obvious reasons; in short, because, apparently, they form one manuscript by intention rather than by chance. But they also belong to one play by virtue of their interrelatedness. In other words, the cycle has unity. In attempts to describe the nature of the unity of one or more of the cycles, critics focus on plot, on theme, on both of these aspects, on sources for the drama in art, liturgy and other drama, or on typology.¹

¹I reproduce Collier's note in Poetry and Drama because it summarizes the history of criticism on the problem of the source of plot and narrative structure of the cycles (see pp. 281-2): "Craig, English Religious Drama, and Hardison, Christian Rite and Christian Drama, for example, associate the cycle structure with the liturgy and liturgical drama; Jerome Taylor, "The Dramatic Structure of the English Corpus Christi, or Cycle, Plays," reprinted in Medieval Drama, ed. Taylor and Nelson, pp. 146-156, claims that the Corpus Christi Feast holds the key to the structural unity of the cycles; Kolve, Play Called Corpus Christi, pp. 33-100, also claims the Corpus Christi Feast as the definitive basis for the cycle structure, and argues for the principles of typology and the Seven Ages of the World as accounting for the selection of episodes in the cycles; E. Catherine Dunn, "The Medieval 'Cycle' as History Play: An Approach to the Wakefield Plays," Studies in the Renaissance 7 (1960): 76-89, derives the structure of the cycles from traditional theological concepts of salvation history; Woolf, English Mystery Plays, pp. 54-76, stresses the influence of pictorial analogues on the structure of the cycles, and influence more fully described in Patrick Collins, "Narrative Bible Cycles in Medieval Art and Drama," Comparative Drama 9 (1975): 125-146; Nelson, Medieval English Stage, argues that the form and theme of the cycle plays was provided by civic processions; Woolf, English Mystery Plays, pp. 336-338, summarizes views on the influence of French plays on the English cycles." See also Timothy Fry, "The Unity of Ludus Coventriae," Studies in Philology 48 (1951), 527-70, for his view of the theme of the cycle as the abuse of power theory of redemption.
Collier emphasizes the problems inherent in any attempt to capture in a statement the unifying principle of any one of the cycles. "Sensing the coherence behind the more readily appreciable variety of the Corpus Christi cycles, critics have offered various definitions of the basis of that coherence." But he feels that most definitions prove to be "too restrictive to include the variety of the cycles or too vague to account for their pointedness."² In Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play, Collier concludes that "no single dramatic principle seems capable of explaining this coherence, just as no single theme can include the drama's variety of emphasis."³ His own solution is to propose that the York cycle be seen in terms of "the action of fulfillment": "a precise motif which is historically and doctrinally relevant to the drama and which is capable of enactment in the various dimensions of drama."⁴

By giving a reading of the York Play which concentrates on episodes in their interrelationships and on how patterns of characterization, language, plot, mood, and theme reflect belief in the hierarchical model of the universe, I provide an illustration for C. S. Lewis' claim that each literary work of the Middle Ages is embedded in the most general "work of art," (the model of the universe).⁵ At the same time, I provide an explanation for the unity of the cycle; an explanation, moreover,

³Collier, Poetry and Drama, p. 259.
⁴"The Action of Fulfillment," p. 37. His motif includes audience response, i.e., the audience's role in the moral meaning of the cycle is part of "fulfillment."
which illuminates those solutions which concentrate on sources, plot, theme, typology, and audience response. The episodes of the cycle form a meaningful sequence, complete and integrated, because all dramatic aspects express the most general theme, the belief that evil and goodness are two responses to hierarchy. This belief has implications for all principles evoked above to describe the unity of a Corpus Christi cycle, that is, for plot, theme, typology, and audience response.

By emphasizing the role of the hierarchical assumption in the coherence of the York cycle, I am able to suggest an answer to the problem of seeing unity in an anonymous text which is the product of multiple revisions. After reviewing the development of the York manuscript, Arnold Williams writes this:

The wonder is not that there are many styles of dramaturgy and versification and much unevenness in dramatic execution but that the fundamental purpose and the basic structure were never completely lost sight of.

and

Suffice it for our purposes that the York plays were built, like York Minster, by diverse authors working over a long span of time, possibly on different plans, but yet have a remarkable unity.\(^6\)

I have argued that the key to the unity of York is its grounding in the assumption which would have been shared by all revisers, writers, actors, and viewers of the original cycle and which is evoked by the context of the drama.

Others see thematic unity as evidence that a single reviser or author was responsible for overseeing the whole of a cycle. In Chapter II, I cited arguments by both Ashley and Gardner. As evidence that there

was a single mind or a committee controlled by a single mind concerned with the unity of Towneley, Gardner also uses dramatic technique and language. While I do not dispute the validity of these latter two points as indications of a single author or reviser, I do question, in both Gardner's and Ashley's work, the use of thematic coherence as evidence. The patterns of character, language, theme, and action may suggest the work of a single artist, or, on the other hand, they may simply reflect the corporate assumptions concerning divine hierarchy. What I have found in the York Play is that this pervasive belief underlies both subtle and explicit patterns in all aspects of the drama. In contrast to Williams, then, I would say that given the teleology of medieval England and the probability that each reviser had exposure to the existing cycle, it is no surprise that a story of creation to doom exhibits structural and detailed unity.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA AUCTORIS

Dorothy Nielsen Ricciotti was born on December 26, 1959 in South Bend, Indiana. She moved to Windsor with her family in 1968. In 1982 she received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Windsor and in 1983 she was granted a Bachelor of Education from the University of Toronto.